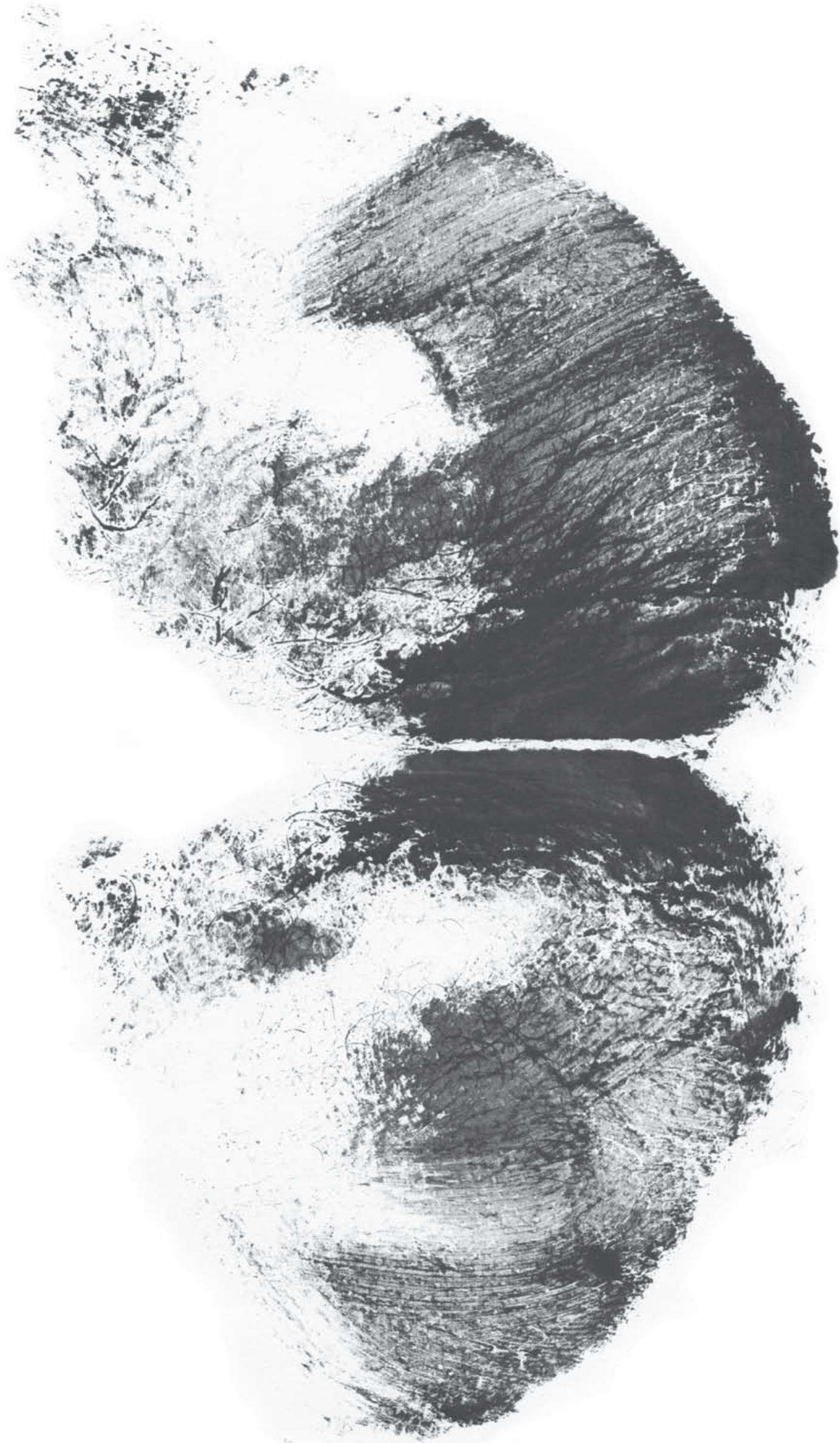


cross currents in culture ●

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Variant engages in the examination and critique of society and culture, drawing from knowledge across the arts, social sciences and humanities, as an approach to creative cultural practice and as something distinct from promotional culture.

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The recent future of Scottish Art

Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland

Scottish Art since 1960

Historical Reflections and Contemporary Overviews

Craig Richardson

(2011) London, Ashgate, 230 pages

ISBN: 978-0-7546-6124-5 (hardback)

In a discussion recorded over two sessions, Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland address issues raised by Craig Richardson's recently published book 'Scottish Art since 1960', which describes its intention as:

"Providing an analysis and including discussion (interviewing artists, curators and critics and accessing non-catalogued personal archives) towards a new chronology, Richardson here examines and proposes a sequence of precisely denoted 'exemplary' works which outlines a self-conscious definition of the interrogative term 'Scottish art.' Richardson addresses key areas of cultural politics and identity to illuminate the development of Scottish art, enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of art practice today."

Neil Mulholland: The introduction is something of a literature review with spoiler, it tells you more-or-less everything that's in the book. The sense of a polemic that's in the introduction, it's never really substantiated in a lot of cases.

Robin Baillie: Craig has an agenda which he sets out, but then he does a survey and tries to suffuse that agenda into it. The artists only come in as descriptive framing, you get these wee thumbnail sketches. I'm not saying they're totally off, that they're not without validity, but they're not an unpacking. They're not analytical deconstructions of what these people are doing.

NM: There are places where the book does achieve this. The section on Steven Campbell does this job well. Craig looks through work as a thing in itself, then looks at its reception and does it justice. There's a sense of this subject being taken as a case study and carefully built up.

RB: The thing about Campbell is there was international recognition of a kind for an individual doing a non-specifically 'Scottish' style. Campbell's difficult for Craig to write his bigger agenda to, because... maybe he doesn't like it aesthetically because it's figurative, it's expressive, but also because Campbell has to be placed to one side to allow the flow of neo-conceptualism to take place.

NM: Because it's one guy as well, as opposed to a group of people, a 'movement' is required.

RB: Although there was a group of them but no one's writing about them of course.

NM: There's more of a sense elsewhere in the book of people doing things collectively – in the discussion of the New 57 gallery, or of Transmission – there's a social network there, one that we don't get in the discussion of Campbell.

There are five chapters in the book. The introduction lays out what we're going to hear about: National Galleries of Scotland, Richard Demarco Gallery, The 57, Graham Murray Gallery, Fruitmarket, Third Eye, Transmission, Modern

Institute. In terms of institutions, these are the narrow limits of the book's structure.

He starts in 1960 with the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) and laments that it never took the form that it might have. He describes its residency in Inverleith House and its move to the West End, but there's never any conclusion reached regarding why this entire episode might, ultimately, have any import. This is especially odd given that what sometimes ends up being, rightly, celebrated in the book is the value of independent curatorial activity. I wonder, why bother with the perceived 'centre'?

RB: What he doesn't say is what a national modern art institution should be doing. He criticises existing institutions for conservative bias, establishment bias, traditionalist bias, and possibly anti-Scottishness, but he doesn't actually map out a possible alternative programme. Maybe because that's a tendentious thing to do. The introduction describes an institutional structure that he can trace over time, through various galleries and their exhibitions.

NM: In scholastic terms, it's easier to map out this territory, because the SNGMA is still here, there are people you can speak to who were/are there and there's a good archive. In general, the bigger and older the institution the better the historical resources.

RB: He also lays out a chain of critical writing, and a chain of artists, for which he's relying on interviews from personal sources – "non-catalogued personal archives".

NM: On the one hand, he is quite heavily tied to institutions, and so to an (unspoken) institutional theory of art. It is a 'Police Force' institutionalism, more George Dickie than Arthur Danto. It's all about joining clubs. Yet there's another incongruous trope regarding landscape and northern-ness that requires a very different approach to this weak institutionalism. It comes across as volkish. It needs taken apart to avoid this, as a geopolitics or via cultural geography. This narrative reads differently, a simple, slightly misty-eyed, thesis that might work as speculative exhibition or as a catalogue text, but it doesn't fit well with the institutionalism. It's not historical.

RB: At the end, he invokes a communitarian art that returns to the land and the sea: "Communitarian cultural renewal might include the ongoing preoccupation with the values of the land and the seas in contrast with the resources of the cities." (p182)

NM: An Turas [depicted, left and top] is simply celebrated at the end of the first chapter, then it just ends..!

RB: It feels like the 'black square' of Scottish art.

NM: A hundred years late for the party.

[Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915, is considered one of the first abstract paintings.]

RB: Craig encourages us to look down this tunnel, and what we're looking at is the landscape and sea framed by the modernist black square. It's his perfect form because it sees Scotland through a modernist black box. So here we have it – he wants an art that has a nice neo-modernist frame, that shows us an eternal identity via Scottish land/seascape.

NM: There's a section later in the book that describes Dundee Contemporary Arts being built that explicitly fetishises it as a modernist gallery, by which I guess he means the structure rather than what it shows:

"the emphatically modernist new gallery Dundee



Contemporary Arts (DCA). DCA's tall exhibition spaces successively opened out and upwards in sequence, it's programme frequently presenting Scottish artists at key pre- and mid-career points and fully presented in comprehensive catalogues." (p165)

He seems to be genuinely excited about the height of the ceilings and quality of the building, certainly more so than, say, what the Dundee artist-run space Generator had been doing since 1999 or what Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design graduates had achieved since the '60s – all of which he neglects to mention. This reads like it's cribbed from DCA's business plan, or a review that's actually a press release. DCA is a similar kind of building... it's very '90s. There's an aspiration through the text to reach this place, this is An Turas, a passage to Venice [Biennale], it's a goal, a destination. Does anyone buy this modernist myth of cultural progress? At the Heart of Darkness lies a vapour, not a jewel.

RB: He deploys a retrospective nationalism where Scots seem to him to possess a distinct identity and this identity needs to be seen, represented and recognised. What are the means he suggests to achieve this?

NM: There's an idea expressed in the first chapter, that the Scottish avant-garde all move to London and remain there in exile; these artists are explicitly framed as the avant-garde, a very limited number of artists.

RB: There's a Freudian-type desire present, a prodigal son parable, about how avant-gardeness can be achieved in Scottish art. That's the prodigality of it – the artists had to go away, when they go we lose them. Their Scottish nature is lost. So can we build a home for the avant garde in Scotland? The problem is that you can't – it isn't produced out of institutional structures.

NM: I don't really regard any of these artists to be avant-garde, there aren't any in the book, not in the true sense of the phrase. Between 1960-67, the time covered by the first chapter, the only artist that lived in Scotland mentioned is Joan Eardley. Very little is said of her work and nothing that's new.

RB: Eardley gets a mention because of her engagement with the land and the sea – that's Craig's thing about style, it must reference its idealised context. It's a domineering slant... always something about 'What is this nation?'

NM: This follows hot on the heels of a fairly lengthy discussion of Stanley Cursiter and the failure to

Above and right: An Turas, Ferry Terminal shelter, Tiree, opened 2003. A Scottish Arts Council funded collaboration between Sutherland Hussey Architects and artists Jake Harvey, Donald Urquhart, Glen Onwin, Sandra Kennedy.



build the palace of art in the form of the failed Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. But there’s no discussion of the specific nature of the collection in the SNGMA. It’s a very particular collection; I want to know what the connection is between what was made in the art schools, shown in galleries here and what was in that collection. It’s sketched out in the mention of the ‘Modern Paintings from Scottish Homes’ exhibition but there’s no detail. It’s handled much in the same way that Eardley is; mentioned but passed over. In contrast, we are introduced to Londoner William Turnbull’s work in quite extensive detail. I don’t feel that this helps us to understand what was (and wasn’t) produced in Scotland. It’s more a ‘what might have been’ had he remained here. There is lots written on Turnbull’s work, not to mention Mark Boyle and Bruce McLean, who also dominate this chapter, but very little on what was made here, be it good or bad. Why bother going back over this well worn road?

RB: It reads like a survey, it has something to do with establishing a pantheon.

NM: He’s chosen works and artists that he considers exemplars of ‘Scottish art’. That’s problematic on so many levels. These artists may well have been formative influences on his own practice, but to imagine that this alone makes them ‘exemplary’ is folly. Exemplars of what we might ask? Of their time and place? How can anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen the correct canon? We can’t convincingly argue that some artists (those included) are any more exemplars of ‘Scottish’ art than others (those excluded). To do that we would need to have an ethnic, possibly essentialist, understanding of the ‘Scottishness’ of art, as if there were somehow degrees of ‘Scottishness’ by which we might evaluate matters. This act of territorialisation is Arnoldian, Leavisite even. It implies that the ethnic constructions of ‘Scottishness’ that we find in and around art, imaginaries that need to be deconstructed, are the method by which we should judge this art. The problem here, of course, is that we can make almost anything seem as if it is uniquely and essentially ‘Scottish’. Hence Scottish Tories, Scottish Labour, Scottish Sun, Scotmid, dotSCOT, etc. Since ‘Scottishness’, like any other form of ethnic identity, is constantly contested, a moving target, we can’t use it as a benchmark to evaluate anything.

RB: Try to make Ian Hamilton Findlay exemplary of anything! Findlay is the artist who should escape this tag most, because he denies many categories. He deals with Scottish identity in a weird modernist, minimalist, concrete way, in terms of the sailing boats, but not as romantic aspiration – that is projected onto neo-classicism. Findlay takes that Enlightenment universalism and he hammers it too. He shows the extreme authoritarian edge of it – order, discipline, militarism is in there as well. So the question then is complex, how do you explain that in terms of ‘Scottishness’?

Steven Campbell, *Young Man Surrendering to the Landscape*, 1983



NM: I see very broad relations and connections between the work of Findlay, Boyle and McLean, but not with Turnbull. He just happens to be ethnically Scottish. Ultimately with Turnbull, Boyle and McLean, whatever we say about their work, I don’t see how they can have made any real contribution to what this book is ostensibly about, namely the infrastructure of art in Scotland. They all live in London, so how could they possibly make a contribution to what goes on here on a day-to-day level? It’s irrelevant whether they were born in Scotland or not, they don’t have the right to vote in Scotland, they haven’t been able to contribute to the geopolitics here... so why are they in this book at all?

RB: This has to do with the whole Union thing; the Union’s in us all: England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. So historically maybe the Union is the biggest issue for Scotland. But is this a motivating force in Scottish art? He lassos Scottishness around people from totally different positions at different times. That Scottish lasso doesn’t fit exactly.

NM: Whether that is a lasso or a noose, I don’t know. It comes up a lot and it’s very contradictory (as you’d expect). Fundamentally, it’s not accompanied with an analysis of nationalism, of what nationhood is, what it was becoming, or of what constitutes a collective or ethnic identity. We are left to speculate whether or not we can categorise these individuals as ‘Scottish’, whether they themselves might accept this identification or, perhaps most importantly, whether thinking about such issues helps to better understand their work.

RB: That’s what I mean; it’s not rigorous. Alright, none of us are as rigorous as we’d like to be – but this loosens his terms and goes back to this idea: What is Craig’s aim in talking about Scottish art? Is it to constitute it? That would be the aim of Hugh McDiarmid in the ‘30s, to actually say, ‘We want to envision a kind of art we would put our name to’. That, in a way, is what he’s doing again. He wants to envisage a ‘Scottish Art’ through writing up a recent history.

NM: If somebody moves to Scotland, then they gain an involvement in its life and culture. There were many artists present through the period 1960 to the present – the era that the book is supposed to engage with – who have legitimate place in a narrative regarding art in Scotland in this sense. Relatively few get a look in here, while a disproportionate number of ethnic Scots who left Scotland are celebrated as exemplars simply because they are ‘Scottish’. Bruce McLean, for example. He may well have been an influence on artists here (and elsewhere), there are lots of other artists who might have been in this sense too, but the issue of his impact is irrespective of whether or not he’s ethnically Scottish. Following the careers of, already well celebrated, ‘successful’ ethnic Scots is a wasted opportunity. The art history of 1960-67 in Scotland could have been the subject of some much needed discussion in this chapter. Even if we accept the idea is nothing was happening – that there was a blockage – then that’s what this chapter should have concerned.

RB: He doesn’t actually interrogate the issues around these periods, he assembles them by saying who he likes within them. It goes back to the chain: which artists can be linked together to form a narrative that brings us to Glasgow 1990? That’s the point he needs to take us to above all else – he loses interest after that point altogether.

NM: The narrative falls off the cliff around about 1994, like Ernst Gombrich in ‘The Story of Art’ when he gets to Cubism. This early bit regarding 1960-67 really is a missed opportunity, it’s somewhat uncharted. It’s not very glamorous and little of it would be perceived to be ‘successful’ on such terms, nor might it really be worth ‘celebrating’ in the way that we are supposed to think, jingoistically, of a ‘national’ art, but that’s exactly why it needs more work. It’s a dirty art historical job but one that really needs to be done... There are points when it does happen, Glen Onwin’s work is discussed at length, that’s helpful.

However, even here, for me, Onwin’s work opens an opportunity to discuss Environmental Art more widely, the fact that ‘public art’ was taught in the art schools around Scotland, not just at Glasgow

School of Art. Muralism, environmental art, mixed media were all approaches taken that are part of a peculiar generalism found in old Scottish educational institutions. Artists were being trained to fulfill a social role. What that meant in the context of those courses was very broad because it went from stained glass to something more placement based. It really was a very broad church with a rich history to unpack. From reading the book, it feels almost as though that never existed here and we needed John Latham to come and make a point that there was such a practice. Again that’s another missed opportunity to do some valuable research into what already existed in Scotland.

RB: He does ask for a Scottish art history to be written.

NM: So you’ve got to take it on as it is.

RB: We’ve got too many surveys already. Most Scottish art history is survey-based – Duncan Macmillan’s and Murdo McDonald’s books, for example. One exception is Tom Normand’s ‘The Modern Scot’ written about the Scottish Renaissance.

NM: McDonald and Macmillan are at least finding something of value back there in the Scotland of the 1960s, whatever that might be. Clearly Craig doesn’t value that work in the way they do – I’m not suggesting that he should. I’d at least like to see a considered re-evaluation of it, albeit that this might be a negative one. We don’t have that. I’d like the received narrative to be taken to task.

There is a sense of what this could offer. He repeatedly uses the Americanism “uptown” to describe a recurring strategy of Keynesian culturalism in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The first chapter starts in 1960 because of the founding of SNGMA, while 1967 is the year of the Scottish Arts Council’s (SAC) formation. This offers a useful frame of critical analysis, an insight into a managerialism that was hotly contested at the time (still is...). He dates this top-down management of the arts dating back to the time that SAC still ran its own galleries in Edinburgh and Glasgow. He, informatively, charts a move away from SAC programming and developing a curatorial remit towards the idea that its job was to support such activities...

Unfortunately, this line of enquiry is dropped in favour of triumphalism when the narrative reaches the ‘90s, despite the fact that such managerialism hasn’t vanished (it has shape-shifted). The more the book unfolds, the institutional character of its bookends become more apparent – a telos of the ‘talented bureaucrat’ emerges in the increasingly managerial tone of the language. It gives the sense that this ‘Scottish art’ is a thing that desperately needs to be managed. It comes back to a weak institutional theory – it’s the institutions that do this job, and they generally do it rather badly, at least at first. But there’s a happy ending, all the bureaucratic hiccups are ironed out, and we all ultimately arrive ‘uptown’, in Venice.

RB: This is the story of his own career as a fellow traveller, by the artist himself – he does have this in his background.

NM: He actually writes about his own work here, in the third person.

RB: So we’ve someone writing art history at a professorial level who’s moved to this point from being part of a circle of artists. Yet, he doesn’t seem to empathise with the artist’s view point in how he deals with them. He’s interested more in, ‘What do we need to create a *professionally* institutional art’; in who is going to help make the decisions that are going to cement Scottish art in its true place.

NM: There’s a lot in here about policy and institutions, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s partly an attempt to write a history of art as a history of institutions. Or it could have been were the narrative not so fixated with institutional (in)effectiveness. Where the story is, understandably, more positive, it concerns institutions that the author has been directly involved with, such as GSA (Glasgow School of Art) or Transmission, or at least has very close association with. So Modern Institute gets attention, DCA is praised, and a few obvious, older, independents are mentioned. This is a very selective account, and not one that helps us

understand the complexity and dynamics of the situation. There are just so many more models of formal and informal art institution in Scotland – operating at many different levels in many places, doing really incredible things – that simply don’t register here. Can’t have them all, sure, but without straying a little more off vested home turf we just can’t see the bigger cyclical picture, institutionally speaking. Instead of rectifying this problem, the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through there and imagines how it could have been... It all ends up reading as a very top-down account, very “uptown”...

RB: Maybe Craig feels more change is needed to represent a devolved Scotland, and as such he has a plan for the institutions of Scottish art?

NM: He talks, interestingly, about breaking NGS up and further devolving it to different regions in Scotland.

RB: His view may be that this kind of institution must work for the aim of constituting a ‘Scottish Art’. And it must be *seen* to be working for this aim.

The date which doesn’t appear in the book, which is like a ghost, is the date of the first independent Scottish government. We’re still at a devolutionary stage and maybe he stopped writing a year or two ago, but there’s this implication that the project is not fully delivered.

It’s almost like he has a reality check – ‘Well, we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got (had) the private gallery doggerfisher, but we know how flimsy it all is’. Of course, because it’s not exactly what he’s imagining – fantacising that an enlightened avant-garde would exist in a truly indepedent Scotland – it seems like merely a step on the way. However, sorry, you can’t have an avant-garde national art! There’s a conceptual flaw in that formulation.

NM: There’s something similar in his demonstration of how the “Modern Institute introduced a level of hitherto marginalised market orientation of progressive and formally challenging artists.” (p167) Here is a definitive correlation of marketisation and ‘progress’. To be challenging doesn’t actually mean being politically avant-garde, but it’s very clear that they’re supposedly the avant-garde’s inheritors, the exemplars. It’s a contradiction; they carry a culture of inheritance and entitlement while at the same time they are innovative and ‘new’.

RB: It’s the torch being passed on, and the ability to carry that torch. That is a progressivist view. How does he deal with that progressivism coming from outwith Scotland? I suppose you eventually get on to Kosuth, Weiner having been shown in Scotland.

NM: Craig mentions ‘progressive’ tendencies from the early ‘70s such as ‘New Art’ at the Hayward Gallery in London in ‘72, and ‘Live in Your Head’ in Switzerland in ‘69. This is just the tip of the iceberg, there were many more comparable shows that the Arts Council of Great Britain sponsored in the early ‘70s. They pushed post-minimalism, systems art, conceptual art, feminism and photoconceptualism. Such work had a powerful voice in *Studio International* (when Charles Harrison was involved with it, and later Richard Cork) so it wasn’t by any means one show in 1972. It wasn’t just this one beam of light nor did it all emanate from London. Significantly, key artists in British Conceptualism came from or worked in ‘provincial’ English towns, like Coventry. It was an international practice that was networked in a way comparable to that Craig describes happening much later in ‘90s Scotland. It often bypassed London. So, the idea that, in the early ‘70s, Scots needed to go to the Hayward in order to see the light in terms of the new work isn’t entirely true. We need to remember, of course, that by no means was this kind of work dominant in the early ‘70s. In Scotland, the points of reference for the so-called avant-garde of the ‘60s and ‘70s, what at the time was called Scottish Realism, were from the 20th century or even from the mid-19th century, the original Realists, rather than any of this explosive networked conceptualism that was going on at the same time in England and elsewhere.

RB: I’ve heard Duncan Macmillan speak on Bellany, saying he’s the culmination of a line right back to Raeburn – the use of colour, light,

some kind of truthfulness, expressive authenticity; a classic universalist modernism. Craig isn’t a universalist modernist (if he was he wouldn’t be so attached to a nationalist agenda). It’s more of a post-modern development he’s pushing, where identity is more important than the internationalist values in modernism. He wants the recovery of identity as a goal.

NM: That issue of a vernacular reading of modernism is central here. Craig gets to it explicitly when he writes about how Sandy Moffat was interested in other manifestations of modernism in Europe, in Germany in particular. Moffat’s connections were mainly German, so he’s looking the other way from Art & Language; East to Europe rather than West to America.

RB: You could simply say the dominance of the Union at no time prevented international art being seen and understood in Scotland. There was no embargo to prevent Scots learning about it.

NM: Sure. This is where the exhibition the ‘New Art’ acts as a cipher, or caricature even. Craig consistently resorts to generalisms in the book, using stock phrases: “exhibitions such as”, “artists such as”, or “writers such as”. It creates and fixes the idea of ‘types’, as if a very specific part can stand in for the whole. You can’t pull this off. It’s the same problem when writing about what went on in 1998 as in 1968. These exhibitions represent quite different positions on what was, at a given time and place, the ‘new art’. The same goes for any artist we may mention... or any writer.

RB: “The avant garde premise of a sequence of Scottish artworks in the 1970s extended the term ‘Scottish Art’.” (p61) Was that their aim? Probably not. What is this term ‘Scottish Art’ and how did a sequence of avant-garde works extend it? Is it: ‘We’ll claim these avant garde art works for ‘Scottish Art’, and then bind them into its story’?

NM: That’s just territorialisation isn’t it? ‘Scottish Art’ in the New 57 Edinburgh in 1972, for example, meant something really very different from the later point at which Duncan Macmillan published *Scottish Art 1460-1990*. The territory is always shifting.

RB: You couldn’t say that the Demarco Gallery had anything other than an internationalist perspective. Its based in Scotland, Edinburgh more so than anywhere else. It aspired to the freedom of avant-garde movement – transfer and cross-over. Granted, Demarco takes Beuys up to the Highlands. Beuys is probably more of a proto-Scottish nationalist than Demarco because Beuys is into German romanticism where Ossian, for example, has a massive presence.

NM: Demarco is transnationalist, although he’s an advocate for Scotland, he is always wishing for a postnationalist context...

The show ‘Strategy Get Arts’ is discussed here in a way that doesn’t really open it up. What was interesting about it, beyond the show itself, is that students who were there at the time, who went on to teach in Edinburgh or took over the committee of the New 57, started to make similar links in relation to what they would bring to Scotland.

So it was important in terms of another legacy; its direct impact on the grass-roots. It filtered down. Glen Onwin’s teaching and work at New 57 was influenced by it. Alan Johnstone is mentioned in the book a lot at points, another artist with deep roots in German (and Japanese) post-minimalism. I want to know more about these connections, instead of a reiteration of what we know about the big benchmarks and creation myths.

RB: Even if he’d been more upfront about testing these people for their role in a national agenda, the survey takes over. He doesn’t want to squeeze people too hard in case he finds that they’re not that bothered about Scottishness. This tests his presumption that you can write a national art history in a country that is part of a bigger unit, whether that’s Britain or Europe...



NM: Again, if you’re going to do it then you need to take it warts ‘n’ all. You’ve got to write about things that you don’t like, to be impartial about it. History doesn’t unfold as we might like it to.

For example, there is a section of the book that follows the story of Scottish Arts Council grants in the ‘70s. It’s similar to reading the New 57’s invective mail at the time; it just as easily could be a letter written last week by Generator to Creative Scotland. It’s interesting, to me at least, but the question is, how do you deal with this historically? In the book, it is all about not being able to get what you want, hardly a new experience for artists.

RB: Once again, the question behind all of these critiques is how would a truly Scottish institution operate? Maybe he needs to nail his colours to the mast and answer that. He doesn’t evaluate Scottish government policies for funding the arts.

NM: There’s nothing in here about that, little even about the changed conditions of post-devolution Scotland. He just doesn’t get to devolution, it’s too preoccupied with other, narrower artistic goals. The book really desperately needs to have an earlier cut off date on the masthead. 1995 is about as far as it gets really, albeit at times the year 2003 is mentioned. I don’t get any sense of the Scotland of the late ‘90s, never mind its art. Where is 1999?

RB: He does talk about the struggle for devolution. He talks about the failed referendum in 1979.

NM: That’s what’s needed throughout. At the end you’d expect there to be a more politically engaged *coda*, something detailed about what’s happened since devolution; it’s been more than 10 years.

RB: This would actually put into place some of the things he is genuinely interested in, such as, what effect is Scotland’s political state going to have on its art production, how is that going to be organised, is it going to be democratic, is it going to make reference to a bigger country next door or not? How are the cities going to play things in relation to the nation? But he doesn’t follow through. Instead there is this almost still-born, coming-to-possession of Scottish art – i.e. that we got to Venice, we’ve got some superstars, we haven’t quite got a contemporary art market but folk have started to talk about us. Then it just returns to aspiration that there will be something even more essential delivered.

It’s a strange notion of transfer... It makes me think in the paradigm of the national pavilions. The nationalist view would be that our pavilion has to be better than others’ pavilions. That Scottish art somehow should have the ability to be more truthful, authentic...

What’s the difference between somebody who’s been able to take a distanced cool overview and look at the evidence, as opposed to someone who’s got a story from being involved, constituting some of these moments? He’s no longer got that privilege of being detached, which may lead to an unevenness of judgement. Is it a history, or a critical overview?

NM: It’s a question of focus, the method here expressly forces a focus on nodes rather than ties, on auteurs and objects rather than practices and relations. The ‘70s saw the formation of WASPS, which came with gallery spaces as well as studio space. There were numerous workshop-studio

Ross Sinclair,
Real Life Huntly
(surveyed from
the *Clashmach*),
2011
photograph:
Anna Vermehren

spaces of that model, Sculpture Studios and Printmakers, that were and remain crucial. The only time that this network is mentioned is via discussion of £1512 by Alan Smith (1977). In this section, we hear about the closure of Edinburgh's Ceramic Workshop in 1974. This only happens because Craig thinks that this work is 'exemplary'. In reading this section, I kept asking, 'what about the Ceramic Workshop, what happened there?' It's here just as a foil, almost as if its *raison d'être* were to close in order to enable the production of an iconic work. We learn nothing about how artists used that facility or how it formed part of a network of studio-galleries. In some ways it's not that different from what happens these days here. Artists are still showing in those kinds of workshop spaces, like Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Studio Warehouse or Rhubaba. It's the same situation. So why isn't that sort of studio-practice led activity more prominent in this narrative, why isn't it considered 'exemplary'?

The focus falls too heavily on the act of consumption, the packaged brand, the gallery. Talking about what the Scottish Arts Council or Scottish National Galleries were getting up to is almost pointless, and in some senses Craig has written, let's say proven, this: There was very little of interest happening there. So if that was the case, where were the interesting things happening? There's no way that it follows from this that there's nothing interesting going on, you've just got to dig deeper, or you've got to think about it in different terms, ask what was possible? I don't get that kind of sense of an infrastructure being established and negotiated, how difficult that was to put in place, of sensitivity to the terms of the time and thus of an understanding of the enormity of what was achieved.

Another example is Transmission gallery. It comes in really late in the book; it's positioned as if it were a separate entity when it was just a continuation of '68-style constitutionalism married to the exploitation of areas in post-industrial decline after the events of 1973. It comes from New 57 and WASPS taking the lead from Space and ACME in London and PS1 in New York – it's all there in 57's archive of letters. All of those activist artists of the '70s were talking to each other about how to get organised, how to take over former industrialised areas (Docklands, Hackney, Queens, Leith, Gallowgate) – networking wasn't just the business of conceptual artists or mail artists.

RB: But if Transmission leads to the Modern Institute, as it does in Craig's narrative – that three 'visionaries' come out of Transmission and go on to produce the Modern Institute – if that's the pattern, then his picture of the Transmission model is the one that should be advocated and re-established at all times, in all places. Or is it inevitable that the market supersedes? Maybe the issue at stake is marketability.

NM: In 'The Night Minds' chapter, looking at the early '80s, he discusses Transmission's early days. There's a quick roll call of what happened there that culminates in more lengthy discussion of Craig's collaboration with Douglas Gordon, Puberty Institution. Although they were both involved with Transmission, this is not explicitly to do with Transmission's work, it's just a collaboration, of which there were many. Here he's writing about something that he experienced himself but failing to describe it, he's just too close to it. In the end, it's about as far as you can get from an analysis of the early days of Transmission. There are so many other better studies of this period in Transmission – there are Transmission's autobiographies (both the published and the aborted version), Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt's MA Thesis, Sarah Lowndes' 'Social Sculpture', lots in magazines, etc. There's so much to draw on, a great archive, loads of punters to interview. Instead, we are ushered on very quickly to an inside reading of the exemplary performance group Puberty Institution.

Hardly any artists feature in this book when you consider it (try running a word cloud on the Google Books version). It's very limited. That's an issue. It's not that it should be completely inclusive, it can't be and there are greater problems afoot in setting out to attempt such a book. However, I think it's so far in the other direction as to be unconvincing.

RB: He's putting himself in the position of being a protagonist. From this position, authority seems to be attributed to identity. This may lead to the attempt to define a national identity in art and to select elements worthy of promotion.

NM: There's definitely an advocacy of ultimate legitimacy regarding who gets to choose, an acceptance of who more recently voices an acceptable authority upon what's produced and reproduced. This comes across most clearly in the triumphalism of the 'Routes to Venice' chapter.

RB: Which would explain that particular selection on who organised Venice, who was involved.

NM: The shameful fact that Scotland has resorted to sending national representatives to take part in a 19th century trade fair is openly celebrated – this is unadulterated Victorian-era nationalism. What he writes here is terrifying in its proud advocacy of cultural authoritarianism:

"The wisdom of the selector-curators was in the careful selection of these three artists at the prime of their experiment-driven practices; the artists were beyond juvenilia but alert to any new opportunities presented by each and every invitation." (p166)

This is the *Birmingham School of Business School* [The Fall, 1992], the corporate state par excellence. It's not meant to be a satire.

RB: Well it would have been a business plan, that was the kind of approach that SAC would have taken. I remember when Jason Bowman and Rachel Bradley curated the Venice Biennale Scotland Pavilion, it was very different of course, it was much more low-key. It wasn't artists who could be capitalised upon on as major names at that moment.

At the end of the book... he comes back to this thing: 'Who are the Scottish artists now?' But he doesn't get to right now, he tails off. Which is strange in a way – he gets to Simon Starling in Venice, 'Zenomap'... It's the idea of assuming a teleology for Scottish art. So you have to want Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, if you want people who've achieved success – maybe on other terms. Does Venice participation mean we've got international recognition?

NM: Anyone can go to Venice, it's a case of getting the money together, negotiating a space, and representing your own interests. You have the Peckham Pavilion, Sheffield and Manchester, these cities and boroughs representing themselves independently of states or nations. You have nations that are not states, like Scotland, and you have many more nations that are states that aren't there because they can't afford it. So recognition is not something bestowed upon you, if you've got the money and the savvy, you can go, you can be there. Venice, as in its heyday, is just a market, it encourages pure opportunism – "take the piggies to market". The quasi-fascistic overtones of this economic Balkanisation requires more in-depth analysis – its not like qualifying for the World Cup!

RB: A lot of things he wants take you to the market ultimately. I think he gets confused by this himself. He's promoting 'Scottish Art'. He wants it to have a radical edge, achieve visibility in terms of the art world, and produce a body of critical writing. However, if these goals have been achieved, so to speak, there has been no political radicalism to underpin any artistic radicalism. Of course, the one thing that doesn't exist, that he wants, is a contemporary Scottish art market.

NM: If there was any home-grown market it has imploded in the last six months, it's totally fallen apart. ... (The book makes no mention of private galleries such as Ingelby, Sorcha Dallas or Mary Mary, despite the fact that they all were significant in the period it encompasses. Nor does it acknowledge the launch of many new artist-run initiatives from which some of the new private galleries sprung.) There are many ways of looking at this. One way is to fetishise taking 'Scottish art' to the international market. Another is to focus on how art in Scotland has internationalised or broadened itself in terms of who's here, who's come to Scotland. Both are present in the book, but far much more is made of just two private galleries – Modern Institute and doggerfisher – than of the non-commercial activity that so obviously outstrips the commercial sector in social, economic and artistic terms. The fact is,

only a tiny minority of artists based in Scotland are, or have been, represented by the home-grown private sector since 1960; to say otherwise is either wishful thinking or strategically disingenuous. The public sector of the 1990s is also, at times, a fantasy funding land too in the book. Contrary to what is implied, very few artists were supported by art school teaching income in Scotland, fewer still by what Craig calls the "pre-eminence of applied research support in British art [...enabled by the] Arts and Humanities Research Board and improved levels of income from charities such as the Wellcome Trust." (p164)

RB: It's strange he refers to a Scots' 'diaspora'. Is he talking about Scots abroad (ethnic Scots who've moved elsewhere) or a Scottishness that's a kind of a network. I think it's the latter the book is about.

NM: There's long been an opportunistic Scots diaspora, as in the 'London-Scot', Scots who have gone away because they want to further their career. They go to a bigger pond. Others became diasporic because they had to leave – because of clearances or since they had no other economic opportunities. So the diaspora's are different depending on who we're talking about. If it's players in the art world, then it's generally opportunistic in more recent years. I wouldn't imagine an artist these days being forced out of Scotland in the way that they might have felt they were in the '40s or '50s. I can see why they would go, but not for quite the same reasons now.

RB: That would be MacDiarmid's point in the '30s: 'Why can't we sustain our own artists? Why can't we recognise the artists among us who are truly forward thinking and advanced?' Craig quotes MacDiarmid's book on William Johnstone, where MacDiarmid contrasts his friend's work with the Colourist school. Craig's ready to pick out those who oppose conservatism but then he's ambivalent about the break represented by Steven Campbell's work. Maybe this is because Craig romanticises the impact of certain styles as opposed to others.

NM: There was a confusion in a lot of art in the '90s between the ideologies of modernism – generally taken as a narrow seam of heroic European Constructivism – with a certain moderne look that people were beginning to revive not just in art, but in design also. People were taking to that just on formal terms, they liked the way it made them feel as consumers. There was never the delusion that this exercise in taste was a new avant-garde as the book seems to suggest. There was an embargo on claiming to be avant-garde from the end of the '70s, it became a joke ("You're not Sidney Taffler, I'm not Dirk Bogarde. I'm not very stylish and you're not avant garde", as Ian Dury put it.) Neomoderne was one of those well thumbed avant-garde grave stones, a mere signifier, a mainstream dressing up box, a text book lesson in how modernism failed (one we had already learned in the '80s) that took itself very seriously. This was just like any other revival – like the late '80s' '60s revival, or Biba reviving '30s fashion in the '60s – it was purely aesthetic, without any political edge. It keeps popping up, this constructivist corpse, as if it were avant-garde. It wasn't then and it isn't now.

The full exchange is available online, at: www.variant.org.uk

The Economy of Abolition/ Abolition of the Economy

Neil Gray in exchange with Marina Vishmidt

Marina Vishmidt's article for *Reartikulacija*, 'Human Capital or Toxic Asset: After the Wage', reflects upon, among other things, human capital exploited as investment portfolio in 'The Big Society'; affirmation and negation as political potentialities; the fragmentation of the class relation based on waged work; financialisation and the collapse of social democracy; the politics of reproduction; and the imposition of, resistance to, and potential negation of debt. All this through the prism of the 'communisation thesis' which seeks to move within-and-against defensive 'programmatic' struggles that tend to reify (class) identities, towards everyday struggles that supersede value, exchange, market relations, and proletarian identity itself – *in a constitutive rupture with its previous situation*. Not just a change in the system, but a change of the system; not later on, but now. This thesis, which develops from a long-view structural perspective of post-Fordist/Keynesian conditions in the labour market, is fraught with difficulty given the seeming hegemony of neoliberalism and the evidential need for defensive strategies against market command. Yet the communisation thesis describes the *problematic* of the present class relation in an extremely prescient manner that takes us well beyond the rote formulas and responses of much of 'the Left'. The exchange below, with Marina Vishmidt and Neil Gray, aims to elaborate some potential lines of this debate with particular reference to the politics of reproduction and debt.

Neil Gray: The 'refusal of work' has been a watchword for autonomist and post-autonomist thinking since Mario Tronti's classic statement in 1965.³ Proponents of the communisation thesis, such as *Endnotes*⁴ and *Theorie Communiste*⁵ (TC), share a common heritage with the extra-parliamentary left communism of autonomist thought and practice (a critique of wage-labour, exchange and the state), yet diverge significantly relative to contemporary transformations in the class relation. Following this departure, you argue that communisation may now have obtained its objective conditions under advanced neo-liberalism without prior need of programmatic socialism: "work is no longer available objectively nor desirable subjectively as a political identity". Hence, transitional demands become increasingly redundant and the objective

becomes immediate communisation. Yet even as labour is withdrawn from the equation through deepening unemployment, and the conditions of available work become increasingly casualised and precarious, work remains for many a common felt experience and an increasingly oppressive reality. What is the basis for arguing that work is no longer objectively available, and how does that support those *in* work? Can you unpack the periodisation offered by *Endnotes* and TC, for instance, and your thoughts on the prospects for communisation?

Marina Vishmidt: Maybe to begin with some clarification – first on the point of the autonomist critique. From reading communisation theory as worked out and debated by those two groups⁶, they would probably not inscribe themselves into an autonomist legacy but are in fact concerned to dispute the core principles of Italian autonomism, naming the historical phenomenon and political tendency of working-class self-organisation as workers as 'programmatisation' – affirming the place of labour in the class-relation rather than trying to overcome it (the place and the relation). What they are trying to understand or theorise is the 'objective' breakdown of the class relation (precarity, financialisation, de-regulation, outsourcing, de-industrialisation) with its 'subjective' side (the breakdown of oppositional class politics or politics stemming from a strategic location in the relations of production) – hence the idea of work being no longer available or desirable.

There are aspects of this account which are debatable. For one it describes a particular Western European experience of the workers' movement in both its institutional and grassroots expressions, the tendential phase of 'Fordism'. However, there are also attempts to outline a more global and contemporary situation of 'unevenness' which is maybe less specific and works with the 'surplus population' idea. The idea that communisation is only possible now, given these objective and subjective conditions, relies on a scheme of periodisation which would also need to be examined more closely for its immanent teleologies and perhaps traces of historicism – i.e. this was what was possible then and necessarily what happened – whereas now we are in a new stage where those outcomes are no longer possible, but this (communisation) is both possible, for the first time, and necessary. I use 'historicism' here in Walter Benjamin's sense in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': this is the past, this is how it was, rather than the rupture created by revolutionary time, which is always contingent and always untimely. Ultimately, as Massimiliano Tomba⁷ has written, if you approach any period of capital with a philosophy of history, you get a teleology, and this is something, for instance, he levels against the 'immaterial labour' thesis⁸.

Periodisation is in some ways indispensable for making any kind of analysis of the present or how we arrived here, but its analytical efficacy lends itself to overstatement. The formal or descriptive adequacy of the theory of the 2nd phase of subsumption – as summarised in the afterword⁹ to *Endnotes 2* – which I would say is quite strong, is also what reveals its limitations, or should make us suspicious, especially as to its universality. But I think it's also possible to approach the communisation thesis as a quite 'modest' one, with less emphasis on its prescriptive side, and more as a diagnosis. What seems powerful about it to me is its simultaneous interest in addressing 'actually-existing' and often defensive struggles coupled with the total refusal of mediation which

would project a horizon beyond those struggles which they diagnose as inadequate, ascribing them a *structural* more than a political momentum. An example of this is the necessity to participate in all struggles to defend or improve wages, conditions, welfare provision, etc., while also recognising that these struggles face 'internal' limits (no longer an existing class or class-affirmative project) which are at the same time 'external' – capital cannot fulfil those demands 'structurally' in the current crisis. This is the 'illegitimacy of demands' thesis. I think there is some ambiguity here as well: demands addressed to capital are at the same time objectives for the composition of a movement, and it is also possible to eliminate any political questions whatsoever, any questions of power and strategy, if the 'objective' situation of capital is read off so seamlessly onto the 'subjective' character of struggles.

Finally, it might be worth mentioning that the term 'communisation' has a history within communist theory and its actual if not now existent iterations – for Lenin and Stalin it meant the transition to a 'higher phase of communism' and thus was implicitly always a way off in the future, once socialism had been achieved, then we could move on to communism. Generically, communisation can mean just the process of the

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abolition of private property and direct control of production by a classless humanity. But in current debates it has become pretty solidly linked to the French post-Althusserian ultra left (*Theorie Communiste*, Gilles Dauve)¹⁰ and to Tiquun¹¹, which are somewhat incompatible versions in one sense as the former focuses on class struggle and structural analysis of changes in the relation between capital and labour, whereas the latter is about developing a theory of insurrection and thus provides a more voluntarist account. But importantly they are linked by a rejection of mediation or any theory of transition or hegemony.

NG: You ask that we envision the shift from the worker to the debtor as the "definitive social identity". But there are many different forms of debt and each has different affects and assumes different responses. What would a campaign based around a 'refusal of debt' look like? How would it be enacted? *Edu-factory* have called for a debt abolition network to campaign against student debt as part of a "general struggle against the contemporary slavery of credit cards, mortgages, and the international debt system"¹² – is this the kind of political work you have in mind? How might such a struggle be generalised from and beyond the student milieu if we take that as an example?

MV: Not to speak for *Edu-factory* here, but in thinking about struggles around debt, I was thinking more of the whole field of social reproduction *and* production, and how it is structured around debt and credit throughout, from monetised welfare services to the housing bubble to pension-fund financed neoliberal accumulation – which is not to downplay the student loan bubble, which now looks set to be the next major item of consumer credit to detonate in the U.S. economy. Debt of course exerts a powerful discipline in the workplace and impairs the possibilities of collective action. As Costas Lapavistas writes, "Workers have become heavily

THE STRATEGY OF REFUSAL

Mario Tronti



END
NOTES
2

MISERY AND THE VALUE FORM



implicated in the activities of the formal financial system both in terms of borrowing (mortgages and consumption) but also in terms of assets (pensions and insurance). These developments owe much to the withdrawal of public provision across goods and services comprising the real wage: housing, health, education, pensions, and so on. Financial institutions, consequently, have been able to extract profits directly and systematically out of wages and salaries. This process is called financial expropriation”¹³.

So what that seems to indicate is that given the centrality of debt both to continued accumulation (drawing debt servicing payments out of workers and students directly and through the structural role of different kinds of credit as tradeable and hedgeable asset classes) and the degradation of living conditions – austerity – worldwide, perforce people are fighting on the terrain of debt and the repudiation of debt. Take Greece for instance, which is being positioned as the sacrificial test case for how far the implementation of policies by international financial institutions to leverage debt for the restoration of their profit rates can go. It seems that struggles then hinge on the identification of debt as key mechanism of the current crisis of reproduction and the maintenance of the current and increasingly unstable gang governance of capital. That the main function of debt is to keep reproducing capital as it is now, which becomes directly antithetical to reproducing social and organic life, and, somewhat less grandly, social institutions and communities.

The dominance of debt over the material conditions of our lives also has intensely subjectifying effects. Jason Read has written recently: “Debt is a mutation of homo economicus: it is no longer, as Marx argued, the subject of ‘freedom, equality, and Bentham’ but the subject of obligation, inequality, and Becker [...] the entire economy of debt is implicated within a work on the self, in which the individual is governed by the idea of maximizing value and managing risks in a series of choices that are radically individuated, but what he does not mention is that the perception of these risks crosses the terrain of thoroughly moralized ideas of hard work, national, and communal belonging”¹⁴. This is something Lauren Berlant elaborates very well in the interview Gesa Helms and I conducted with her about a year ago¹⁵.

NG: The economist Michael Hudson talks of the expropriation of pension-fund savings as one of the more innovative methods by which the wage was attacked from the ’60s onwards. Instead of supporting workers and the industries they labour in, these funds – advanced by companies in a trade-off for a slower growth in wages it should be noted – were typically invested for financial gain in stocks and junk bonds as forms of corporate speculation and looting that operated *against* labour and *against* ‘productive’ employment and working conditions by siphoning money away from what Hudson terms productive capital formation¹⁶. We don’t have to agree with Hudson’s yearning for a ‘good’ productive capitalism under Keynesian conditions, to see that the old idea of the worker as *the* producer of wealth has taken a knock in the era of the ‘rentier economy’ and conditions of rampant financialisation (even accepting the shift of much labour to the ‘Global South’¹⁷). In the context of what we’ve been discussing, how does the financialisation/debt nexus fit with the



communisation thesis on the contemporary class relations?

MV: “The old idea of the worker as *the* producer of wealth” would be the classic figure of the programmatist workers’ movement, the idea that since workers produce all the wealth, the bosses are just parasites who can be made redundant through the initiative of those workers, or their class organisations. In a number of historically and locally differentiated ways, this idea, and its associated political trajectories, runs from the mainstream of the social democratic or Labour left in the 20th century all the way to the discourse of the ‘commons’ today, and it inheres, albeit problematically, also in the ‘negation’ and ‘refusal of work’ tendencies of Operaismo and autonomism. Whether it’s as producers, or as ‘reproducers’ performing unwaged or care labour, the idea is that we could run all this better ourselves. The question of social relations organised through the form of value does not come up.

What financialisation shows us is that value is derived these days, and for the past few decades, from the old capitalist dream of money making money, and workers are a cost, unless they are debtors: for a financialised capitalism the class relation is between capital and debtors, and we only create value for capital through the extraction of our debt (which is to say, we create no value – not because of massive, if unorganised, waves of defaults and bubble deflations, but because that’s not where value comes from). So the response to how the communisation thesis relates to financialisation is that it tries to assess the situation where labour is no longer a source of value to capital, only a ‘cost’, nor to its subjects, who increasingly do not find sustainable sources of reproduction in waged work.

NG: In his discussion of the rentier economy, Hudson argues that rental incomes derived from private property are an unproductive “free lunch” gouged from the economy at large, forcing an ever-higher proportion of wages to be spent on rent and basic social subsistence, and denying it for more socially useful means¹⁸. And Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, summed up the theory of communists in a single sentence: ‘Abolition of private property’¹⁹. Yet struggles around rent (and its corollary, debt) are routinely viewed as secondary to workplace struggles. A central argument of yours is that the extraction of rent (characterised by debt) has superseded the extraction of surplus value from labour power as a primary motor of capitalist accumulation – at least in the ‘advanced’ capitalist economies. In conceptual and practical terms, what might emerge politically from an understanding of this shift?

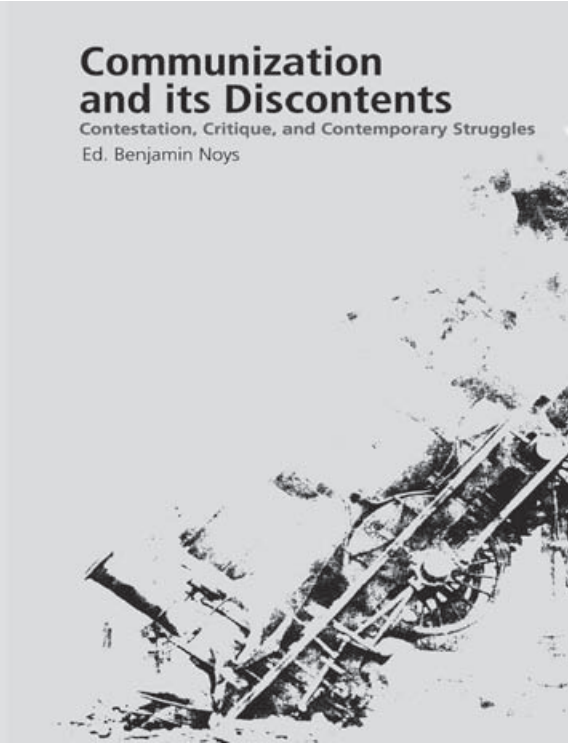
MV: Well, I think here some of the thinking by Edu-factory, George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici on the repudiation of debt, particularly student debt, is interesting, following their ongoing, decades-long analysis and activism around the geopolitics of debt and enclosures in e.g. Africa and the ‘global South’ through Structural Adjustment Programmes. We can see that kind of looting being practiced on a much more overt scale in the West now, which was already to greater or lesser degree leveraged as nation-state economies, with an increasingly debt-financed and thus shrinking social expenditure when that debt-financing has to be restarted in less favourable global conditions. Federici and Caffentzis are very good on the disciplinary and atomising effects of debt, its corrosive effect on social solidarity or social change.

Another kind of shift might be what I was hinting at with ‘toxic asset’ – if your debt is an asset, become a toxic asset class. A significantly inessential labour force which supports capital through its levels of debt-financed consumption (like the sovereign states themselves), which has it inculcated that their only source of social security is asset prices, such as house prices appreciating, and that capital’s fortunes are their own – well, in a time of crisis, with deteriorating living standards becoming actual for more and more people, that

practical identification between the interests of capital and the interests of ‘consumers’ is harder and harder to sustain. Thus a politics of debt becomes an issue simply because debt is so central to sustaining people’s lives, with extreme job insecurity and flat wages, rising unemployment – it might become harder to link political claims to work when work is so precarious and degraded. But most workers are also debtors and are also users of social services at one or another point, so it’s the linking up between those struggles, and where the axis of them might be located at any political conjuncture, which can help us track the shift between the political register of work to the one of debt.

Also, it must be stressed here that workplace politics and a politics of work are not the same thing – that’s why communisation theory’s account of the implications of the loss of salience of politics tied to the identification with or as labour is relevant for me here. It is trying to understand what the proletarian side, or the revolutionary potential, of the negation of the capital-labour relation by capital might be. Perhaps it does risk a sort of one-sidedness here in its emphasis on the agency of capital, just as it can be said the broad category of ‘autonomism’ risks the one-sidedness of worker’s agency, whether through refusal of work or practices of ‘self-valorisation’, being the leading variable in the capital-labour relation. It is risky though to dissociate ‘self-valorisation’ practices, or theories, from their specific social and historical milieu in 1970s Italy, because in the neoliberal era, it just sounds like human capital, valorising yourself – we have to hold on to the collective and contestatory element of self-valorisation, its practical critique of/antagonism to capital’s self-valorisation – but also put it in context.

NG: The *unconditional* ‘Right to Work’ campaign suggests the affirmation of the wage-labour relation just at a time when ‘the Left’, with no shortage of evidence, might be better occupied forming a coherent critique of wage-labour, exchange and the state. This defensive position suggests a loyalty to the state in misrecognised form given the advance of uber-neoliberalism and the irretrievable demise of Keynesianism (even at its best, a form of state intervention designed to *preserve* capitalism)²⁰. In this context, how might critique and practice be carried out in order to enact what Habermas termed the ‘Legitimation Crisis’²¹, the potential mass withdrawal of support and loyalty for the state? What role does a politics



of debt, or in your terms, the struggle for an “uncapitalised life” have to play in this regard?

MV: Looking at the Occupy movement, even if qualified by the admission that they are so heterogeneous in their politics and social composition (probably less so than in their politics), they don’t seem to hold out that much hope for seeing this kind of withdrawal of loyalty and support happening on a mass scale, unless it’s through the self-administering of autonomous austerity. Saying that, why would we expect it to be any different? All that people know of social provision and political power is in the form of the state. There are no other legitimate actors, in most people’s awareness and experience, for implementing consequential changes, as opposed to bottom-up small scale community-building or activism. The state still sets the operative framework for people’s lives, and representation in that state is still a viable demand to many for this reason. Even a politics of debt takes place on the terrain of the state, which is quite legitimate in some ways, as it’s fighting against relinquishing concrete working-class gains (or ‘social gains’, if you like) to an ever more rapacious and privatised/privatising state. The state is totally indissociable from transnational financial institutions and unelected organs of transnational governance like the European Central Bank (ECB). Its role as enforcer, facilitator and legitimator of these financial rent demands – as people have been witnessing since the bailouts and are now witnessing/suffering in a big way with the Eurozone crisis – is possibly the only thing that can get people to withdraw their loyalty from the state, but even this, in many operative cases, within the occupations as well as left/centrist parties, culminates in a quest to reform or ‘reclaim’ the State. It is the only worthwhile challenge, I think, to figure out what it would take to break through this attachment, but it’s also a vicious circle: if there were a viable alternative to the state, the State would have ceased to exist. It’s like the fallacy of the basic income: if capital could be convinced not to extract surplus value, then people wouldn’t have to work....

NG: The solution to the economic crisis is obvious from the point of view of both the right and the left – more productivity in order to generate more ‘wealth’. The only argument is over how much is distributed, with the left seeking a ‘fairer’, more equal share of surplus wealth for all. The problem with this picture, as Marx long ago made clear in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*²², is that it ignores the basic alienation and exploitation that underpins surplus value extraction (profit) at the point of production. This is even more decisive when thinking through the global production chain without the myopic lens of those who invoke ‘political economy’ and the spectre of the Keynesian state. The ‘Open’ Marxist school, and those associated with the radical left of both communism and anarchism have persistently challenged this logic of production and trammelling of creative, free labour into ‘abstract’ and alienating wage-labour, yet a critique of productivism remains marginal in the UK. Can the figure of the debtor release us from the spectre of Stakhanov²³ and the productivist ‘model worker’ – ‘service’, ‘manual’ ‘immaterial’, ‘affective’, ‘creative’, whatever...

MV: Yes – it’s interesting to consider that while the neoliberal era in the UK has seen the eradication of a mainstream (oppositional) working-class culture, and while fewer and fewer people derive their self-definition, sociality or political engagement from their waged labour, the residues of the traditional Left as much as, understandably, the unions, still organise around work as if it had the resonance it once did with either the constituents of the unions or the indisputable agents in the equation, that is, the governments, the markets, and the expansive networks of ‘governance’ at both national, EU and global levels. Reproduction, or non-reproduction, as Ben Seymour calls it, of the capital relation these days happens primarily through extraction of super-profits through rent-seeking and speculation in ‘legacy values’ like land, direct extortion like enclosures (be it of land or welfare states), and

micro-finance rather than industrialisation, with its emphasis on expansion and the wage-relation – commodification without wages. Therefore, the structural and political redundancy of labour as a basis for oppositional or transformative politics has to be put into question, since capital addresses us by and large intensively, through direct extraction and setting up paypoints in a molecular, self-consuming fashion on the social terrain, rather than extensively, that is, by interpolating people into an expanding form of production.

If, as Seymour writes in his recent text, ‘Short Circuits: Finance, Feedback and Culture’²⁴, “the diffusion and networking of risk enabled by derivatives displaces risk from the local to the systemic level”, then that risk has to be both assumed and ruptured by a politics of non-repayment of debt, a refusal of austerity and a raising of the risk premium for the whole financial system – this is the only way to dis-embed from the financial system we are all totally involved in at every level, whether we are benefit recipients, unpaid domestic workers, academics, gamblers, property developers or City analysts. But saying that is just to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of the financialisation of capital and our lives as reproducers of capital. The class content of those positions in the relations of (non)production are very, very disparate and incompatible – which is what is both captured and totally missed in the ‘99%’ slogan. But to return to the figure of the debtor as a repudiation of productivism, and the point Ben makes about risk operating on a systemic level, I guess what that would entail, in terms of strategy or modes of organisation, is to operate on the same systemic level, and to attack infrastructures of financial bondage is immediately – at this point in time – to attack capital as a whole, no matter how local the attack is. So I am not convinced by the idea that such attacks prompt merely ‘local reforms’ which would just displace the risk and the austerity onto others, either geopolitically or socially. I don’t see a horizon for reform here, simply because the nature of systemic risk militates against local concessions. Which also brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s thinking on the necessity of creating a ‘real state of emergency’ through organised proletarian revolt, through materialising the violence of the system that creates an emergency for ever-growing numbers of people every day and turning against it.

Some more considerations I would add here, albeit definitely more in the character of tentative questions which are only being posed in this inadequate form because of their importance, would be the individualising and atomising effect of debt which seems to hinder an ‘organised debt default’ from becoming a mass movement – though here you’d have to make a sharp distinction between mass individual debt such as consumer credit, healthcare, mortgages, education, etc., and sovereign debt which does tend to provoke resistance on a relatively mass scale, as we see in Greece. As Amanda Armstrong writes recently in the ‘Generation of Debt’ pamphlet²⁵, “debt is a collective phenomenon suffered individually”. The individualisation is also etched very much into the moral inflection of debt, which, as many commentators including Berlant, Federici and Jason Read make clear, is how austerity-peddlers get away with making the pernicious elision between household debt and national debt when ‘selling the case’ to hostage populations. People who are in debt to financial institutions or universities genuinely believe they, as individuals, are responsible for making the fictitious capital that keeps these institutions running real by paying back the money. The moralised power of debt must be everywhere combated with the economic and political, the structural, role of debt, as much in ‘personal’ debt as it patently is now with the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone. Another point that Federici and others have made repeatedly in their writing on student debt default²⁶, is that higher education is increasingly mandatory for entering into the job market *at any level* in the U.S.; certainly into any miserable service job in a metropolitan area. So people in student debt bondage are effectively taking a massive wage cut as a generation, by and large,



in the U.S., for example, where student loans are non-dischargeable, and that will now also be the case with the tripling of fees in the UK. Or the fact that the rise in student tuition acts as collateral for university borrowing on the markets and helps pay stratospheric administrator salaries. Given just how profitable debt is across so many layers of capital, the moralised debt-repayment argument is increasingly hard to defend. Thinking of debt as individuation here, as self-investment in one’s human capital, as an emblem of maturity and creditworthiness, is particularly laughable when it’s a matter of employers offloading their training costs onto individuals (or credit markets, ultimately).

What does this mean for communisation’s ‘breakdown of the class relation’?²⁷ So here again it would be a question of class composition analysis and inquiry: how is class reproduced in debt rather than in work, when debt is, or rather has, sustained more and more of people’s reproduction in general? *Endnotes* have written: “As the wage form loses its centrality in mediating social reproduction, capitalist production itself appears increasingly superfluous to the proletariat: it is that which makes us proletarians, and then abandons us here”. Perhaps now that could even be modified to say, as we tried to formulate with the recent *Mute* panel at the Historical Materialism conference, capital is leaving labour much more rapidly than most people have derived a politics from losing an identity as labour.

NG: The project of Italian autonomist Marxism is often understood as the workplace struggles of the ‘mass worker’ in its autonomist variant, or the information/communication struggles of the ‘immaterial labourer’ or the ‘cognitariat’, in its post-autonomist guise. While *Theorie Communiste* seem to critique autonomy and ‘self-organisation’ primarily with the figure of the mass worker in mind²⁸, my feeling is that the 1970s wave of reproductive struggles (rent strikes, occupations, mass squatting, ‘self-reduction’) that followed on from the high point of the mass factory worker in the late-60s/early-70s has not been given enough attention as a means by which we might orientate the struggles of the present. Here we have an exemplary analysis of the breakdown of the class relation and a theory of re-composition to accompany it. To my mind, Lotta Continua’s account of the ‘Take Over the City’²⁹ movement in 1973, for instance, is a considerable advance on the

largely rhetorical analysis of contemporary ‘Right to the City’ advocates. Despite reproductive issues emerging at the forefront of struggles in Glasgow recently (e.g. the Govanhill Baths campaign, the campaign to block the M74 Northern Extension, the occupations of both Primary Schools and Universities, the defence of Public Park space at Pollok Park and North Kelvin Meadow, and the Save the Accord campaign), there is limited evidence that the implications of these struggles have been understood theoretically as part of a wider shift in reproductive relations. What are your thoughts on these forms of reproductive struggle in relation to our present conditions? And how do they relate to contemporary discussions of communisation?

MV: I agree that those reproductive struggles have not been sufficiently taken into account, and part of an explanation for that, I think, is that TC, et al. give all their emphasis to the ‘programmatist’ strand of Operaism and Autonomism – Tronti’s ‘Copernican turn’ that workers’ struggles are the independent, not the dependent variable, in the development of the capital relation – and not to the expansion of struggle beyond the workplace, beyond and often against the identity of the worker. These kinds of struggles on the terrain of reproduction are historicised by them as ‘ancillary’ and ultimately reliant on the primacy of the ‘mass worker’ as an insurgent political force. This is something I’ve tried to approach through the paradoxes of the ‘Wages for Housework’ movement which seems to be a great illustration of this primacy³⁰. The other ‘copernican turn’ of Italian autonomist feminism, the discovery that women were productive labourers because they were producing the commodity labour-power, also should be seen

in connection with this primacy of the productive worker, even if its ultimate meaning was to break the invisibility of the reproductive circuit – but in the terms of the workers’ movement. This is also of course contradictory: it also undermined that primacy by positing unwaged work as a moment of a much more expansive terrain of labour for capital which is not recognised by it but without which it could not survive. This is of course true and crucial for any communist or feminist analysis, yet it also leads directly into the obsolescence of the law of value thesis, the ‘we are producing value all the time and everywhere’ notion of the productive multitude which is probably the most obvious fallout of autonomism’s crypto-identification with the mass worker.

However, it doesn’t seem to me that you can confine those episodes and those struggles to an epiphenomenon in that way. Their contestation was indeed, as you say, much more thoroughgoing, and indeed provided many examples of both the theoretical and practical measures that would have to be taken in the process of communisation. There is an extent to which the work coming out

of the ‘communisation’ tendency, in development since the 1970s, is both coming out of and is a reaction against the dominance of workerism and post-workerism on the ultra-left, so the perspective on the limitations of those struggles articulated in that analysis has to be situated in that nexus.

In some way, we can read/take part in reproductive struggles the same way as we do in workplace struggles – they are about the same issues: to prevent the erosion of already significantly degraded living conditions and, in anti-gentrification struggles, the privatisation of what public goods still remain. I can’t really see a principal difference in horizon between them in terms of success, but they must be fought regardless as it’s the only way of building counter-power or composing any form of collective organisation to live ‘deprived of capital’ as we do now, or ‘after capital’ as either a disastrous or positive scenario. Certainly, there’s not much mileage in a politics of reproduction displacing a politics of production since both are subject to the same financialising and totalitarian, ‘looting’ imperatives. This is the scale of reproduction which seems crucial to focus on – how the reproduction of the capital relation is unfolding now. We can of course look at it from the perspective of gender, class, race and other social divisions operative to the current regulation of access to social wealth and division of labour, and here you certainly still see massively enforced stratifications based on access to the wage, stability of employment, state or private provision, and how differential the impacts of re-structuring in the austerity of regime are.

NG: I was taken by your description of the dialectic between affirmation and negation in social movements. First, the notion that in any social movement there needs to be a clear identification of a position of exclusion or injustice, and that this identification is inevitably contradictory or antagonistic in the sense that the excluded group must frame their exclusion in relation to the dominant relation of capitalist hierarchy, patriarchy, race or class. This first moment of affirmation (or self-recognition), then leads to the second moment of negation whereby the very conditions that frame those hierarchies must be overturned in order to supersede those relations and divisions *per se*. In this sense, difference is a fundamental category in the understanding of the common. But how might identitarian ‘flag-waving’ for the ‘working-class’³¹, for instance, be superseded in favour of a mobilisation which seeks the abolition of all classes in a movement of communism – when the first moment of affirmation is on the wane? Can communisation in this context be a genuine *mass movement*, or merely a partial and fragmentary movement of those who have forgotten how much they’ve already learned?

MV: I think a similar question was posed by Benjamin Noys recently in the panel launching *Communisation and its Discontents*, a book which he edited. In response to one of the panellists making the point that capital migrates from countries with strong labour laws and labour class identity, where working-class struggles had been victorious at some point, to countries with few legal rights or little social organisation of labour, (where those battles had either never been fought or been defeated or where the degree of industrialisation was lower), he said something like: ‘so communisation and capital are interested in the same thing: a weak and atomised working class’. This was not said in all seriousness, and clearly the type of interest we’re talking about is very different – at its most basic level, an interest in a political diagnosis of the present in order to overcome it, versus an interest in maximum profit. Still, what both of you are pointing at here is what is taken to be a sort of ‘catastrophism’ which can strike some as immanent to the communisation hypothesis – things are so bad now, the chances for communism have never been so good. But there is of course another way of reading that, which is to read it as a fairly modest claim – given how things are, this is how things would have to happen in order to do away with this situation: a descriptive one, as opposed to a prescriptive one. This delineation is not always clear in publications working with the communisation

hypothesis, and it has been referred to as a conflict between humility and hubris in the reach of the theory. Another thing which should be appended here is that communisation doesn’t consign all, or any, defensive struggles (over wages or benefits) as futile or misguided, seeing as they fall short of total social revolution. It only says that they encounter their limits very soon, both contradictions within the movement and in the likelihood of success of their demands given capital’s global valorisation crisis. I think what’s been happening in Greece, as much as the movements that have been underway here in the UK, couldn’t be a clearer demonstration of that. But no revolt, no improvement, however limited, no concession, should ever be disregarded.

The question does remain however, about the nature of the subject ‘proletariat’ as the agents of communisation in communisation theory. To me, it seems you need at least this minimal affirmation of some class subject to distinguish communising from rioting and looting – or be forced to admit that rioting and looting is in an important sense communisation – and at the moment, I am not convinced that distinction can be made within communisation theory without sneaking in some faint but vital trace of ‘programmatism’ through the back door, which is the proletariat as a kind of (non-) subject. This is something that would need to be resolved, for me, through further reading and discussion. It seems to me like one of a number of presuppositions in communisation theory which are not articulated as such but which seem to ground a lot of other structural elements in the theory – but which are also problematic in terms of other elements, like the idea of class belonging as constraint. It may be that this residual proletarian identity is something that needs to be negated actively in the communising process, rather than passively as it is by capital right now – in this respect it functions like ‘self-organisation’, which is a precondition for revolution but must be overcome within it. But I am not yet clear where the residual affirmation of a revolutionary subject is coming from.

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NG: That, for me, begs the question of ‘unity’ – the eternal mantra of the left. What do calls for ‘unity’ mean when, with the de-socialisation and fragmentation of labour, unity can no longer simply be based on the wage? I think the autonomist conception of class composition is potentially extremely useful here: where, finally, might we see a re-composition from below in present conditions?

MV: Unity develops out of a situation of antagonism which has two poles: negation and possibility – the refusal and the proposition (not the demand). The feeling that it’s possible to do something together engenders an affect of possibility, regardless of whether that’s a ‘destructive’ or ‘constructive’ event, or what the content of its practical critique of the prevailing barbarism might be. Unity, unlike contradiction, is a product of rather than a precondition of a sequence of struggles, and from this perspective I’m very interested in the ‘gender abolition’ perspective advanced by members of the communisation current, in and outside of the main collectives. The discussion of ‘women’ as a category of subordinate worker and social being in every class society, and its function within the capital relation in particular, relates to overcoming gender as part of the value-form as an immediate principle of communisation. The abolition of gender seems to me one way of producing unity through rupture, through inevitable division of interests and positions in the reproductive

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apparatus and in the movement. It’s the idea of the ‘revolution within the revolution’ which bridges the analysis of Italian autonomist feminism, the insurrectionist tendency (Claire Fontaine, Tiqqun, specifically Fulvia Carnevale who has taken part in both entities), and the TC/Endnotes communisation tendency. This seems like a very promising direction, and I am curious to see how or whether other divisions instrumental to the survival of capitalist domination, such as ‘race’, might enter into this analysis, and what kind of role they might play in the current prospects for the kind of re-composition you’re talking about.

Notes

1 Vishmidt, Marina, *Human Capital or Toxic Asset: After the Wage*, <http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=1487>

2 For an insight into some of these problems and potentialities, see, Noys, Benjamin (ed), Introduction, ‘Communisation and its Discontents’, <http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=299>

3 Tronti, Mario, *The Strategy of Refusal*: <http://libcom.org/library/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti>

4 *Endnotes*: <http://endnotes.org.uk/>

5 *Theorie Communiste*: <http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/?lang=en>

6 “Also important to distinguish TC from *Endnotes* here as the main English-language exponents of communisation theory (there are also Swedish and Greek groups: Riff-Raff, Blaumachen, etc), as *Endnotes* tend to foreground empirical economic analysis and value-theory critique (Postone, Arthur) much more in their work, reflecting their own political experiences, debates and milieu” [Marina Vishmidt].

7 Tomba Massimiliano, ‘Revisiting the Grundrisse and the ‘Fragment on Machines’, talk at Goldsmiths, University of London, 8 November 2011.

8 For a classic statement of the immaterial labour thesis, see, Lazzarato, Maurizio, ‘Immaterial Labour’, Available at: <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>

9 *Endnotes 1*, Afterword, October 2008, available here: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/14> . “The crisis of the social compact based on the Fordist productive model and the Keynesian Welfare State issues in financialisation, the dismantling and relocation of industrial production, the breaking of workers’ power, de-regulation, the ending of collective bargaining, privatisation, the move to temporary, flexibilised labour and the proliferation of new service industries.

The global capitalist restructuring – the formation of an increasingly unified global labour market, the implementation of neo-liberal policies, the liberalisation of markets, and international downward pressure on wages and conditions – represents a counter-revolution whose result is that capital and the proletariat now confront each other directly on a global scale. The circuits of reproduction of capital and labour-power – circuits through which the class relation itself is reproduced – are now fully integrated: these circuits are now immediately internally related. The contradiction between capital and proletariat is now displaced to the level of their reproduction as classes; from this moment on, what is at stake is the reproduction of the class relation itself”.

10 See *Endnotes 1* for a recent discussion between Gilles Dauve and *Theorie Communiste* that outlines the developing contours of the communisation thesis: <http://endnotes.org.uk/issues/1>.

11 *Tiqqun*: <http://tiqqunista.jottit.com/>

12 *Edu-factory*: <http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/campaign-against-debt/>

13 Lapavistas, Costas, ‘Financialised Capitalism: Crisis and Financial Expropriation’, Research on Money and Finance, Discussion Paper no. 1, <http://www.soas.ac.uk/rmf/papers/file47508.pdf>

14 Read, Jason, ‘Debt Collectors: The Economics, Politics, and Morality of Debt’. at: <http://unemployednegativity.blogspot.com/2011/11/debt-collectors-economics-politics-and.html>

15 Helms, Vishmidt, Berlant, *An Interview Exchange with Lauren Berlant*: http://www.variant.org.uk/39_40texts/berlant39_40.html

16 Hudson, Michael, ‘From Marx to Goldman Sachs: The Fictions of Fictitious Capital’, *Critique*, Volume 38, Issue 3, 2010, pp.439-440. Available at: <http://michael-hudson.com/2010/07/from-marx-to-goldman-sachs-the-fictions-of-fictitious-capital1/>

17 Even here, as an important article in *Endnotes* points out ‘the general law of accumulation’ means that technical fixes in production soon create surplus populations of workers: contrary to received opinion even China has not seen an increase in its labour force lately (1993-2006). See ‘Misery and Debt’, *Endnotes 2*, 2010, pp.20-51. Online at: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/1>

18 Hudson, Michael, ‘From Marx to Goldman Sachs: The Fictions of Fictitious Capital’: <http://michael-hudson.com/2010/07/from-marx-to-goldman-sachs-the-fictions-of-fictitious-capital1/>

19 Marx, K and Engels, F, *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin Classics, 2002, p.235

20 Negri, Antonio, ‘Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the

State post-1929’, available at: <http://libcom.org/library/keynes-capitalist-theory-state-post-1929>

21 Habermas, J, *Legitimation Crisis*, Polity Press, 1988.

22 Marx, Karl, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>

23 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexey_Stakhanov

24 Seymour, Benedict, ‘Short Circuits, Finance, Feedback and Culture’, *Mute* magazine, 2011: http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/short_circuits_finance_feedback_and_culture

25 Armstrong, Amanda, ‘Insolvent Futures/Bonds of Struggle’, in *Generation of Debt: the university in default and the undoing of campus life*. Available at: <http://reclamationsjournal.org/current.html>

26 Gonzalez, Maya and Manning, Caitlin, *Political Work with Women and as Women in the Present Conditions: Interview with Sylvia Federici*. Available at: http://reclamationsjournal.org/issue03_sylvia_federici.htm

27 See for instance, ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’, *Endnotes 2*: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/2>

28 See, *Theorie Communiste*, ‘Self-organisation is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome’: <http://www.theoriecommuniste.org/>

29 Lotta Continua, *Take over the City - Community Struggle in Italy, 1973*. Available at: <http://libcom.org/library/take-over-city-italy-1972-lotta-continua>

30 For a brief discussion of Wages for Housework, see, Vishmidt, Marina, *Human Capital or Toxic Asset: After the Wage*, <http://www.reartikulacija.org/?p=1487>

31 Interview with Werner Bonefeld, *Shift* magazine, Issue 5, <http://shiftmag.co.uk/?p=260>:

“Class analysis does not partake in the classification of people – its business is the critique of such classification. Class struggle is the struggle to dissolve class society, relations of class domination and exploitation, in favour of commune – this society of the free and equal, an association of the freely assembled social individuals. So if correctly understood, class should be a critical concept, not an affirmative concept. The old class concept was an affirmative concept; it affirmed class position. It wanted to re-distribute in order to create a fairer deal, a new deal, for those on the wrong side, or the wrong end of the stick. The critical concept of class, which is to dissolve class, battles against the existence of class society”.

“Language is never neutral”

“How does political change occur? Does it stutter along in a series of incremental developments, accidents and setbacks, creeping so slowly that we barely notice its happening? Or does it leap forward in a sudden rush, carrying everything along with it?”

In March 2007, *Variant* commented that the publication of the Draft Culture (Scotland) Bill “marked a defining moment in the relationship between the state and its cultural workers”². The Bill itself was the direct product of a lengthy review³ and a three month consultation⁴. However, its form had arguably been cast as far back as 2000, with the Executive’s publication of ‘Creating our Future...Minding our Past: Scotland’s National Cultural Strategy’⁵; a future proposed in 2004 through an urge that “we should make the development of our creative drive the next major enterprise for our society”⁶, and concretised in 2006 when government’s “role and responsibility to help strengthen, support, and in some cases provide for, Scotland’s cultural activity” was formally defined⁷. It then underwent a reduction in scope in the wake of the 2007 Scottish parliamentary election – which saw the Scottish Nationalists emerge with the parliament’s first working majority, replacing the previous Lib/Lab ‘partnership government’. And the mooted transfiguration of Scotland’s then existing supports, The Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, into the development body of Creative Scotland became inexorable with the eventual publication of the Creative Scotland Bill in 2008.⁸

Located amidst a wider context of neoliberal reform in which the value of culture has been reframed and instrumentalised, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Scottish government’s role for culture was thus defined. Since the publication of the Bill the policy domain has remained active, not only in assembling the means for transition, but through the introduction of additional measures, including cross-party support for the advent and protected status of Traditional Arts⁹. The fact that Creative Scotland explicitly locates itself as operating for and within a “single purpose government”¹⁰ predicated on the panacea of “sustainable economic growth”, makes infrastructural tightening and protectionism towards Scotland-the-brand seem inevitable. However, while *Variant* has long remarked that reforms of cultural provision are overdue, Creative Scotland has wider-reaching implications than simply superseding previous institutional arrangements. The removal of art-form specialisms; the abrupt, disruptive ‘transfer’ of Flexible Funding Organisations to Annual Portfolio Companies; the formulation of centralised Strategic Commissioning and Franchises, mark just a few of the notable changes in directionality at an administrative and funding level. Most tangible is the decisive shift to this language of service delivery, signifying a fundamental re-orientation of the many ways in which knowledge has previously been produced and culturally communicated in Scotland.

The dismantling and overwriting of the previous infrastructure will undoubtably leave its mark on artists, creative practitioners and arts organisations throughout Scotland. Whether experienced directly through a loss of funding or an inability to maintain activity through diminishing planning horizons and increasingly precarious labour arrangements, including the formalisation of debt, or indirectly through the demise of a sufficiently diverse cultural scene, the impacts will be manifest. The extent to which impacts will be felt, not only for the short-term viability of practice but to the long-term boundaries of what is and what can be constructed through cultural funding, becomes all too clear when the protection of a Traditional Arts, whilst all else is left to compete in an entrepreneurial ‘creative economy’, is coupled with a new language which narrowly articulates the criteria for artistic practice. It is difficult to ignore the feeling that we are witnessing the formation of ‘legitimate’ subjects of art and culture and a re-imagining of what it means to use those very words. It is impossible to ignore the sense that this is a challenge to the diversity of cultural and therefore

political expression as a democratic right.

Despite all that can be inferred, these shifts to date have largely been enacted within a policy arena that is perhaps marked most by its silences. Certainly, much of this effect can be laid with Creative Scotland. Details of its structure have been protracted, and its staged revealing of what this means in practice have been analogously slow. And yet this silence must also be regarded in at least two other areas: academia and the arts. Within academia those who seek to unravel the policy, political and cultural dimensions of this change are difficult to locate. This at a time when the cultural and constitutional (re)imagining of Scotland is prescient. Comment, let alone sustained analysis and considered critique, seems frustratingly absent. To what extent this is ‘absenteeism’ borne from decisive retraction or is indicative of a shift in the cultural activity of academia is open to question. It would be reticent not to also point to the tentative silence which pervades the sphere in which Creative Scotland seeks to operate. While many are mindful of the developments above and maintain engagement by way of an expectant gaze, the drip feeding of policy details and the unfamiliarity of Creative Scotland’s chosen tongue has left critical activity within this sphere ostensibly subdued. Of all the silences this is by far the most understandable. Apathy, resignation, expectation, confusion and naïvity combine to create a field of practice whose collective potential seems fated to wait; whose questions are being held until they can correctly be asked in the appropriate pro forma. But there is a tactical dimension to the current conditions which must be recognised. In spite of a pervasive silence, policy continues to aggregate, revealing the wait for articulation to be essentially a wait for Creative Scotland to frame and constrain the parameters of the debate. One thing Creative Scotland has articulated at length is the Scottish government’s primary belief in the economic utility of art and culture. Accordingly, the time for re-imagining is now, save we be left with no option but to understand ourselves in the language and function that others intend for us.

Variant, feeling this heightened imperative, has sought to proactively and collectively consider the potential impact of these changes for artistic practice and, more broadly, for the meaning of art and culture in contemporary Scotland. Arts organisations and creative practitioners (which are not necessarily synonymous) have previously been supported through varied levels of state support and have operated from a range of ideological and practical positions, albeit with increasing difficulty as regards their relative autonomy. However, within these different positions we believe that there is an opportunity for meaningful discussion: to consider what we really think and what we really want; to understand and strengthen our own positions and conditions of practice whilst acknowledging the differences we positively hold. As a contribution towards such a dialogue, *Variant* has invited¹¹ a series of responses to issues raised by Andrew Dixon, CEO of Creative Scotland, in the interview with him in the previous issue of *Variant*¹², which here take the form of interview exchanges¹³ and written responses¹⁴. The constraints which make difficult the possibility of even beginning to form such a collection have become all too stark. The lack of any certainty with regard to *Variant*’s own funding stability imposes its own limitations. The potential need for professional and personal anonymity has also had an understandable impact. *Variant* takes its ethical commitment to respondents with utmost seriousness. While we understand that the publicness of this task may have deterred some from contributing their voice, we wish to make clear to those participating, those who may participate in such discussion in the future and to those reading, that we will continue to deal with such matters ethically and sensitively. The question of who can speak is of course more complex. We recognise the formal and informal structures which constrain individuals’ from being able to adopt a speech position, and that positionality – in this case, the inherently gendered construction of positions – is clearly

reflected in the responses gathered¹⁵.

Acknowledging the realities through which these shifts are conceptualised and experienced, the information asymmetries that exist, and the entry points which inevitably follow, the decision to adopt a narrative structure for responses was taken¹⁶. In each verbal exchange respondents were prompted to give some context for their own engagement, with their account being left to unfold within those broad terms of reference. The openness of this approach is reflected in how the responses are presented within this text. Contradictions that exist within and between have been left to sit upon the page – the fragile logics which may appear to strengthen through momentary connections are allowed to visibly return and counter that upon which they are predicated. And that’s exactly it: the intention was never to comprehensively analyse and disseminate *Variant*’s ‘reality’ of Creative Scotland for all concerned, nor to seek clarity across responses gathered. The intention was not to shut down debate, but rather to engender the conditions for discussion and help bring to the fore some of the necessary questions that, even in our differences, we have collectively arrived at. These responses emerge as art in practice, they are the textual imagining of the possibility of something else. Far from being a dialogue in disarray, this is a silence that is being contested.

Variant, Editorial Group

Notes

- 1 Lahoud, A (2009) Post-Traumatic Urbanism, Available: <http://post-traumaticurbanism.com/?p=138>, [Accessed 29 November 2011].
- 2 *Variant* (2007) Privatising Culture, Available: <http://www.variant.org.uk/events/privatising29/PrivatisingCulture.htm>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 3 The Scottish Executive (2006a) Culture Review, Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Arts-Culture/19347/18411>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 4 The Scottish Executive (2006b) Draft Culture (Scotland) Bill: Consultation Document, Available: <http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/14095224/0>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 5 The Scottish Executive (2000) Creating Our Future... Minding Our Past, Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/nationalculturalstrategy/docs/cult-00.asp>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
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- 7 The Scottish Executive (2006c) Scotland’s Culture, Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/89659/0021549.pdf>, [Accessed 28 November 2011], Page 4.
- 8 The Scottish Government (2008) Creative Scotland Bill, Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2008/03/13094003>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 9 The Scottish Government (2010) Scotland’s Traditional Arts, Available: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2010/12/03163022>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
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- 11 *Variant* (2011) Call for responses to interview with Andrew Dixon, Available: <http://www.variant.org.uk/42texts/call42.html>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 12 *Variant* (2011) Investing, Advocating, Promoting... Strategically, Available: <http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue41/adixon.pdf>, [Accessed 28 November 2011].
- 13 Conducted by Lisa Bradley, *Variant*
- 14 Collated by Leigh French, *Variant*
- 15 67% of those working in the visual arts in Scotland are women, according to the Creative and Cultural Skills AACs LMI report (2010), Available: <http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/nextstep/lmib/Next%20Step%20LMI%20Bitesize%20-%20Creative%20and%20cultural%20skills%20-%20visual%20arts%20-%20Jun%202010.pdf>, [Accessed 29 November 2011].
- 16 In total 8 responses were made: 3 narrative interviews and 5 written responses.

Responses to *Variant's* interview with Andrew Dixon, CEO of Creative Scotland

Lindsay Gordon, Director of Peacock Visual Arts

Lindsay Gordon: Okay, a little bit of context. I'm 62 years old. I've been living and working in the Arts in Scotland since 1975. I used to work at the Scottish Arts Council and back then at least, well, it was patrician. The chairman was Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the director Alexander Arbuthnott Dunbar. The Arts Council was set up by the economist John Maynard Keynes after the war, exactly the same year as I was born and Nye Bevan set up the NHS. And it was this idea that these things were good for you. But it was patrician. But at least it was kind of honest, you knew where you were. The Arts Council of Great Britain, which spawned the Scottish Arts Council, had a thing called a Royal Charter. Not a business plan or a strategic whatever. And the Royal Charter said three things. You are there, one: to improve the practice, knowledge and understanding of the arts. Two: to increase accessibility to the arts. And three: to liaise and work with other bodies, local authorities etc., in pursuit of the first two. So it was very top down. But honest, transparent. And it was the idea that culture, actually, was good. During the war it was shown to be good for morale, and it was all part of the great socialist ideals: orange juice, education, culture, great stuff! [pause] It's a long time ago, Lisa. You're young, you won't remember that. I left the Arts Council in 1992 and I'd already started to see this shift away; from art being something worthwhile in itself. I think it's because where we were at the time – and I include myself in this – what we were trying to do was to get more money out from government to the people on the ground. And at that time in Scotland we were trying to build up an infrastructure so that instead of artists wanting to bugger off to London they might actually want to stay here. So we invested [laughs] – we put money into things

...what I feel most is that in reality, the arms-length principle is gone, completely. And we are now, all of us, cultural workers.

like workshops, studios, places where artists could work and do things, and galleries where they could show them. But in order to get more money we thought, “we have to come up with some new arguments”. The old argument that art, like orange juice, is good for you, was getting tired. So, I remember this guy called John Myerscough, the economic impact of cultural blah-de-blah, and us thinking, “oh, that's a good idea, now we can start talking in the language that politicians are interested in; the economy, they can understand that”. So we actually sold that pass ourselves. And now, well I went to one of the last dying acts of Scottish Screen and they were talking about Communities Cash-back: money that government takes back from criminals – alleged criminals – and gives back to Scottish Screen. And it was entirely instrumental in that this time round they wanted to measure the impact very closely. But actually, what they wanted to show was that the involvement of young people in cultural activity, the arts, would lead to a reduction in ASBOs on Friday and Saturday night. That's not my problem and I'm not going to pretend that I can do anything about that, that's a much, much larger problem. So, there's been a complete change, from a kind of laissez-faire, high Tory, this is good; to a completely instrumental view of art and culture. And what I feel most is that in reality, the arms-length principle is gone, completely. And we are now, all of us, cultural workers. If we want to get our wages paid we're going to have to do what the Scottish Government wants us to do through its conduit of money: Creative Scotland.

Lisa Bradley: To what extent do you think there has been an even further shift, from the social impact towards an explicit economic impact?

LG: I think we've all got to be honest. Let's talk about art or what is now called the visual arts. At one end

of the spectrum it's a luxury commodity, it's part of capitalism. It's Louis Vuitton handbags and Hugo Boss suits. I work in a printmakers, Peacock, and we produce multiples. And what's the point of producing twenty of something? You've got to do something with it, you sell it. So we've always been in that mixed economy. I'll come back to printmaking, because printmaking could be, should be, a subversive art form. But it aids, and it has always chosen to aid, the capitalist art market. You only produce a limited run and then you destroy the plates. You're creating rarity out of something which actually should be available for everybody. But those kind of contradictions are absolutely inherent in the art market; in art. [...] That's a dilemma, a dichotomy which one lives with. [...] So I think sometimes we have a tendency to be not entirely honest with ourselves if we purely critique something which is of a capitalist nature, because we are also the producers of those luxury goods and some of us benefit very nicely from doing that. And maybe that's ok. But what I think is worrying now – and I don't know how much this worries individual artists but I do know that it worries some people who work in the infrastructure, in the organisations – is that more and more we see that if we want the money, we have to dance to their tune. And their tune is becoming more and more explicit. And at the moment it's a direct copy of the Scottish Nationalist's agenda: for richer, whatever, whatever, whatever. And worryingly I think, if you look at the Scottish Nationalist's agenda the arts are not mentioned at all. So, they are simply there as an instrument to help deliver, whatever. It's that whole neoliberal lie that pretends and only values you for what you can deliver, not for art. Art, good art, should be and always has been subversive. Revolutionary. Biting the hand that feeds you; chopping the head off the person. And I think that's going to get more and more difficult as a new breed of arts administrator come through, buying the language, buying the ideology, worrying about wanting to get on. And I think that's rather sad. I listened the other day, two days running in fact, to the radio when I went home. And the first day was George Soros talking about the economy, telling the truth: they're all lying. And the next night it was Umberto Eco, telling the truth as well: they're all lying. And these old men are chuckling because no one listens to them, and that's okay because the whole roller coaster is just going. So, where is the role ahead? Well, when I read Andrew Dixon, you know [pause] words fail me. Because I'm sure he actually believes what he's saying. It's pathetic.

LB: Are you angry at what's happening?

LG: How can I be angry? I mean, I should be angry, but it's just, you look around – I mean, just look. See, I'm going to sound like another old man; I am an old man. I wish I was angrier instead of just grumpy. Not even grumpy, sometimes I'm just sad. I think, well, what the fuck is this all about. And I'm sad a lot at my fellow human beings, the inhabitants of this planet, this country, this town. Because Glasgow boasts Shopping with Style, it's a shopping culture. The arts: they've become part of “lifestyle”. And really what one wants is to get out there with the guys in George Square. There should be more tents out there, shouting louder. And that's where the artists should be. And that's where old guys like I should actually be, to encourage the younger artists to be more political and to be, basically, subversive. [...] And I come back to what worries me most, those, like Variant, who have never enjoyed any secure funding from the Scottish Arts Council, now Creative Scotland. And long may they not in a sense, because as long as they don't it shows that they're doing a good job. It is irritating the establishment. And that's what more artists and arts workers should be doing.

LB: Where is the space for that?

LG: Come to Peacock. No seriously, and places like Street Level in Glasgow. There are some of us that actually want to see more subversion. And sometimes, I'm disappointed. You get a call for open submissions and ideas; proposals. And frankly, the artists [pauses] what the hell are they – what's happening to artists who go to art school?

LB: You trace a couple of trajectories, one in terms of the lineage of policy formation, but there's also a real-world context which seems to mirror the policy context.

Andrew Dixon is positioned as a figurehead for Creative Scotland, when there was none in such a way before. So we must deal with what he represents as his opinions. He appears careful to say appropriately inclusive things but he displays the qualities of a politician and therein lies the spin. Once the image fades there are many issues and contradictions that become apparent, specifically the gap between the rhetoric and the examples he uses. There is little room here to analyse his proposed exemplary culture(s) but I can present the immediate issues as I see them and talk of what I would delve further into.

The language used by Creative Scotland (CS), which Dixon is the mouthpiece for, seems to have changed from that of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) with a number of distinctions being made about the value of culture. I would like to point to a number of assumptions that have been made and how his/ its position is symptomatic of a general neo-liberal turn in the meaning of the word ‘value’ from social to economic worth.

A personal example I could give is my experience in the last couple of years as a committee member of an artist run space. One which had survived on SAC funding for several years but, being outside of the flexi-funded loop, completely ignored strategically since CS took over. Why is that? Quality? No, that doesn't seem a consideration. Reduction of budget? No, following his/ its new logic those whom you would think CS get most value from, a wealth of production on a minuscule budget and voluntary ‘CV-building’ labour, have been confusingly missed out. Or is it more to do with surface visibility and an old fashioned ideals system that is not profit making or cannot be presented as such. The message is that you were lucky to receive it in the first place and if you want to do it you should be self-sustaining because it is self-indulgent, only of relevance to yourselves. But this seemingly ignores the symbolic: you take away that level of activity and you are left with a gap, no space outwith the commercial or the instrumentalised for contemporary practice(s).

There is also the problem of the concoction of ‘partnership’ working as innately positive, and in general of culture as a positive force, for if everything has to be wonderful then the space for critical discourse is narrowed, the assumption being that critique is of detriment to...something. The use of the words ‘creative’ and ‘talent’ have connotations which cannot be ignored as they reduce the work of artists to hobby and innate ability, placing less emphasis on the work put into the practices of artists and groups, reducing its potential for agency, and demanding usefulness as a ‘value’. The language used is important not because he might mean what he says, but rather as an important signifier because it normalises a rhetoric that submits culture to singularly economic purposes. For example, the deeply problematic, if also totally vague, idea of the ‘franchise’, which seems to centralise power in organisations with their own non-neutral agendas, is something that needs analysis.

Also, as an artist who had moved back North, holding a naïve view of the values of public funding and believing I could better survive within the Scottish environment, I did receive one of the last SAC grants and I would like to reflect on that process as it was and how it has changed. Since, I have not heard of one person who has actually applied as an individual artist, most sighting option paralysis - a difficulty in categorising themselves from what's discernible. I would like to look into it further to see what the facts are, who has been able to apply in the last year.

I have joked with people about the ultimate CS ‘commission’. It is easy to be cynical about it. But I would not propose that we regress into or reminisce about a former system, one in which over the past decade neo-liberal pragmatics were more hidden but nevertheless in evidence, but that we don't close off the options either; don't reject that there might be a possible space outside ‘entrepreneurialism’ for anything other than ‘Traditional Arts’.

I would like to be able to write a response which was thoroughly researched, in depth and was able to reach a wider audience, but unfortunately there are few spaces left for dissenting, questioning voices and little time.

Shona Macnaughton

I can't tell whether it's policy shaping the real-world context or whether it is the real world to which policy is responding. In terms of Creative Scotland, where did it come from; where is it going?

LG: Creative Scotland, it didn't come from nowhere. There's a history. It came from the late '70s, early '80s, the arts administrators who well-meaningly tried to convince politicians to put more money into the arts. And hence the instrumentality. Andrew Dixon talks about the prisons, for example. But it was an earlier generation of arts administrators who started that. And so it's that, coupled with the present Scottish Government. The other stuff you're asking about, I find harder. Recently Sandy Moffat, David Harding and Sam Ainsley, organised a conference called State of Play: Art and Politics in Scotland. Here Sandy reminded us of that very interesting and exciting time in Scottish politics in the mid-'70s, in the lead up to the watershed that was 1979, the 40% referendum on independence. There was a sense back then that artists and intellectuals could actually come together, that there was an opportunity to shape our destiny as a country. It was exciting. But we were young. Does it feel like that now, Lisa? You're young.

LB: It certainly doesn't, no.

LG: Why's that do you think?

LB: I suppose I struggle with the apathy that seems ever more present, while at the same time I am frustrated that there's not many spaces in which I can critically engage. That doesn't feel possible within existing spaces, and certainly not in a grander sense. And my interest in art and culture comes, then, in viewing its transformative potential. And I don't mean that simply in an instrumental sense, but it excites me that the sphere of culture and the arts can exist as the antithesis of the state and as such can be a space for contestation and difference. And I think that's why the language of cultural policy and the manifestations of that language concern me so much.

LG: No, I totally agree. Sometimes I do get depressed, not necessarily about the things you were talking about there, but about the stuff I see, the art I see, the projects I see. And every so often you come across something that's, like, powerful. Effective. Beautiful. Usually where it has empowered other people; where people can tell their own story and can interrogate the circumstances they find themselves in. We did a lovely project in Aberdeen called ASS, Aberdeen Street Skaters. One day I noticed that around the offices of the City Council, these metal skate-stopper things that looked like twelve-inch long, metal phalluses, had been built overnight. So I said to a friend of mine who was living in Aberdeen – Eva Merz, a photographer – “will you photograph this shit?” Because it was just so absolutely, aggressive: “you are not going to have fun here”. Even worse than that, it was unnecessary. So we photographed the disenfranchised, the people who wanted to go skating. And of course the funny thing is that most of those kids, well, they weren't working class kids. They were the nice, polite young boys who went to a good school. So they organised a group called Aberdeen Street Skaters, and they realised that they had to have a manifesto. And the ASS manifesto says: “The Association's principal aim is to improve communication, inclusiveness and openness in all aspects of public interaction and to emphasise the fact that people come before buildings and economics. It is the citizens who create and develop culture in the community. This culture should be supported, not obstructed by the authorities – always remember – never forget!”. [...] So that's kind of empowering, you don't have to accept all this shit.

LB: Seeing decisions like that delivered through policy all over the UK, signalling that there is a right and proper use of something, are we starting to see those messages being delivered through cultural policy?

LG: I have two grandchildren, I'm very lucky. My granddaughter's fifteen and my grandson is thirteen. And they have two rules. I said to them one day, and unfortunately my daughter, their mother, overheard, but I said “right guys, we're talking about rules. There are only two rules, actually there are only three. First rule is, disrespect authority” and I think it was at that point their mother started to walk in. “Second rule, always ask why. So what's the third rule? Well there isn't really a third rule, but it's a good bit of advice: always stay wild”. Well, if you constantly disrespect authority and always ask why, then the world would be a better place.

Two Committee Members from Transmission Gallery

Transmission Gallery is an organisation supported by a large membership of artists in Glasgow and the UK. The opinions expressed in this interview are based on the experience of these individuals as serving committee members.

Committee Member one: My engagement with, or understanding of the changes that are taking place in cultural policy generally began with the realisation that there are definite changes affecting the particular funding situation of this organisation: specifically, the end of Flexible Funding and the introduction of Strategic Commissioning. [...] Strategic Commissioning doesn't provide the stable, long-term support that allows us to be flexible in our programming and to develop projects over time. Also, the term 'strategic' seems to highlight the issue that decisions relating to what culture is and what purpose it fulfils are being centralised. In the interview with Variant, Andrew Dixon talks a lot about what 'we' need; he refers to 'we' quite a bit and to the 'gaps in the map', and 'gaps in career path'. But there's not really much about who that 'we' is, and what will be achieved when the gaps are filled in; what that's working towards. Another thing that has a huge impact on this organisation is the funding situation for individuals and the working conditions for individual artists and practitioners, because they're the people we're working with most directly and most of the time. [...] The situation for funding individuals seems to have become a lot more [pauses] difficult. The funding that does exist seems to be completely [pauses] well, it seems that nobody's really figured out if there are any development grants for individuals yet. When you look at the Creative Scotland website, the language is so difficult to find your way around. And the removal of art-form specialisms creates confusion.

I'm worried that the language used by a funding body, in this case the language of management and business, and the imperatives they place on those applying for funding ... can begin to shape the way we speak about our own work and understand 'value'.

Lisa Bradley: Would you add to what [committee member one] has said, or do you have a different response?

Committee Member two: When I was reading the article and Creative Scotland's Corporate Plan, there is some specific language that is really concerning. [...] I want to resonate on [committee member one's] point about that question of what culture is and who it is for. I guess I fear that in the changes, the autonomy of organisations might be affected. For me, reading the interview and corporate plan, all the language about collaboration and partnership, Creative Scotland seem to say that they're taking more responsibility. But they're also delegating out the responsibility and management in a tier system. For me, what that screams is more administration and less autonomy. [...] Not to mention the fact that some organisations may now be competing for funding with Creative Scotland. There is a lot that's difficult about the upcoming changes, but for me one of the most concerning things is the language and how that language makes it difficult to access a knowledge about how it's running, especially as an individual artist.

LB: Can you give me an example of this new language?

CM2: A lot of it now, well, most of it, doesn't apply to individual artists. It'd be interesting to make a map of who the opportunities are relevant for. You see increasing amounts of opportunities to increase your marketing skills; advice about how to run a business; how to interact and collaborate with the tourism industry.

LB: Do you view this change in language as a benign shift or as something more purposeful?

CM1: Purposeful in what sense?

LB: I suppose I'm asking whether you see it as a response to the current conditions; viewing cultural policy as

sitting within a broader policy context?

CM1: Yes absolutely, I see it as a funding body or an 'investment agency' adopting the language of neoliberal governance; marketing language. I think a lot of organisations are very adept at picking up on the language used by other people and adopting that language. And I think that's the process happening here. I'm worried that the language used by a funding body, in this case the language of management and business, and the imperatives they place on those applying for funding – to produce statistics to justify their work for example – can begin to shape the way we speak about our own work and understand 'value'.

LB: And when you acknowledge the position of cultural policy within a 'single purpose government' aiming for 'sustainable economic growth', to what extent do you think the language moves beyond responsive to purposeful?

CM1: Well, I suppose you can argue that naturalising business language within the arts and teaching arts organisations to think of themselves as 'companies', paves the way for marketisation.

CM2: And also, the business language, it's not just talking about figures and number crunching. It's talking about participation, accessibility, talent, innovation, creativity, collaboration. These kind of words appeal to people and have meaning. But when they're put through this

We're in a climate where 'entitlement' to public funding in the arts is becoming a thing of the past – and I think this might be harder to acknowledge in Scotland than in England. It seems like we've had a decade in public funding of the arts tied to government social inclusion agenda, and now it's an economic agenda.

While commercial values are not always at odds with the production of quality artistic work – selling has a place in the visual arts in Scotland – success in Scotland has been dependent on which one has been the driver. The ability to support the individual, nurture new talent, take risks and respect the time needed for meaningful creative development has been a strength of arts funding in Scotland.

While a 'culture of dependency' on the grants system is not desirable – one where many of the same artists continually receive money, and similarly for institutions shifting to being producers – we do need a funding system that knows *when* and *how* to support talent and take risks. Artists and the arts by their nature will never thrive if treated as Fast Moving Consumer Goods.

Creative Scotland might have a strong developmental role but it's not that evident. Whereas the Scottish Arts Council was never just a 'cash machine'; it was an arts agency that was hugely developmental and it 'invested' – DCA (Dundee Contemporary Arts) is a prime example.

Language is important in the arts. The language of commerce adopted by Creative Scotland sits oddly with how we engage with arts and culture in Scotland. An emphasis on prescriptive investment schemes risks screening out many good artists from applying. Emails headed 'Creative Scotland Investment Update' read at first glance like one of those email bank scams. Language perhaps for a government rather than a people?

It is not misplaced nostalgia to recall the structure of committees and panels at the Scottish Arts Council and the debates between members that underpinned a rigorous decision making process – it took time, we came in for criticism at times, but the process was rigorous.

Who makes the decisions at Creative Scotland?
How are those decisions quality assured?
What expertise underpins the decision makers, and are they internal staff or external?
What is the profile and rotation of the decision makers?

Where do we find this information?
When we submit our ideas to the Creative Scotland 'Ideas Bank' who is judging our intellectual property (a potential financial asset we are told)?
Where is the decision making process published on the Creative Scotland website?
Arts Council England publishes all National Portfolio funding allocations. Why are all Creative Scotland's sizable public funding allocations, including those given to revenue funded organisations, not also online?
Why isn't there more transparency?

Wendy Law
Independent Arts Manager
www.wendylawart.com
Edinburgh, October 2011

business filter, they mean something quite different.

CM1: Using friendly, comfortable sounding words to describe things. That may mask certain realities. [...] I think by presuming that everyone’s pursuing ‘sustainable economic growth’, and that art and culture is instrumental in that, I think that causes problems.

CM2: I would agree. Even more strongly. I think that presumption that we’re all pursuing economic growth, if you’re operating a mode of support for arts and culture through that assumption, it becomes problematic. And I don’t think it’s just necessarily Creative Scotland or the Government, but it applies to the whole situation of how our society is structured at the moment.

LB: Could you tell about some of these more concrete shifts you’ve witnessed?

CM1: I think the main practical shift is that there is no longer a specialist visual arts officer with whom we have regular contact and a working relationship. That person was really vital to us, given the fact that this organisation is run by practicing artists who don’t necessarily have much administrative experience or a background dealing with funding bodies. It’s not so concrete, but the uncertainty created by the looming end of Flexible Funding is another shift – maybe not only for Transmission itself, but also for other visual arts FXOs [Flexibly Funded Organisations] that we’re in contact with. There’s a definite thing hanging over everyone that at the end of the next financial year there’s going to be this complete change. That’s creating a [pauses] quite a fearful feeling. You get a sense by observing how other

organisations are acting that people are attempting to position themselves in line with what they think the new structures will demand.

LB: Are you meaning in terms of the work that they’re curating; the programmes they’re planning; the discussions that they’re having?

CM1: Discussions, but also work that they’re curating. It’s maybe not good form for me to talk about another organisation explicitly, but take, for example, Creative Scotland wanting to remove art-form distinctions and promote cross-disciplinary working. The programmes of certain arts venues seem to be made up increasingly of work produced by theatre practitioners or dance companies and visual artists in collaboration. I don’t think that interdisciplinary working is a problem in itself and I have no hard evidence to say that that’s entirely a response to the funding situation, but it seems like that to me. It seems like a step towards Commissioning.

LB: In terms of the end of Flexible Funding and the beginnings of Strategic Commissioning, what are your understandings of that change and what do you think it will mean for Transmission and other organisations?

CM1: [F]rom what I think I understand of it, I can’t see how this organisation, or really any visual arts organisation with a permanent premises, can fit within that structure. It seems from the interview, and also from hearing Andrew Dixon talk about it at Creative Scotland’s FXO conference last year, to be very much focused on the geographical spread of things. It’s maybe a slightly more workable arrangement for

theatre organisations. And I believe the majority of organisations that are currently Flexibly Funded are theatre companies, so there’s some logic to that I suppose.

the term ‘strategic’ seems to highlight the issue that decisions relating to what culture is and what purpose it fulfils are being centralised.

CM2: I also don’t know much about Strategic Commissioning, but what it does sound like to me is [...] if the funders see two different organisations doing something that seems on the surface very similar they’ll see that as a replication, and therefore not necessary.

CM1: It seems to be about putting in place a designated career path in every city and throughout the country, where there’s maybe an artist-run gallery where recent art school graduates can show their work, and then a small institution, and then a larger one [CM2: Yes]. They don’t want ten artist-run organisations and no Fruitmarket Gallery. And maybe I’m oversimplifying it, but they seem to want to put in place an officially sanctioned career ladder and they want to make sure that there’s one rung on every step of that ladder. There’s loads of problems with that strategy, but the most fundamental is that it’s totally top-down and doesn’t allow people to do what they want to do, and to put what they want to put in place, in place. It only validates one logic, one career-trajectory.

CM2: And that logic brings you into the market.

CM1: Yes.

CM2: Dixon also talks about the importance of ‘adding value’. When people show younger artists’ work he talks about the value in that as something they can put on their CV. And that’s really, really dangerous language for me. And that’s not just the language, it’s a point of view: It’s the type of thinking that only sees value in doing something, or being involved in the arts community if it’s going to get you somewhere else after that.

LB: Can I ask you to expand upon that danger; how will it materialise if what you’ve described comes to fruition?

CM1: It excludes organisations and individuals who are working in ways that don’t fit into that prescribed career path. So that decreases the diversity of what’s happening culturally in Scotland.

CM2: Rather than that being about freedom of expression, it’s more about freedom of communication and the spaces where you are able to actually communicate publicly within a community and society. And I think that it will affect Glasgow. Maybe not a huge majority, but I would say that a majority of artists working in Glasgow are working in that way.

CM1: Yes, it undermines the idea of self-organised or self-institutionalised space as something that is of value in and of itself – as opposed to being of deferred monetary value. It undermines the value of alternative ways of working and of ways of working that might actually be [pauses], overtly resistant to the kind of career trajectory Creative Scotland are prescribing. At best it misunderstands and at worst it actively suppresses the idea that self-organisation might actually be a choice taken by people who want to work within an alternative infrastructure rather than use it as a stepping stone to, I don’t know, to the Venice Biennale or something [laughs].

CM2: There’s also quite a few groups I know who want to avoid needing to apply for funding at all costs. But actually, they quite rely on places like Transmission existing and are aware of that relationship. [...] There are a lot of smaller artist-run organisations and similar places that allow activity to happen outside of institutions but which also contribute quite a lot to the culture of the city. Though it’s almost impossible to justify those kinds of practices using Creative Scotland’s current policy.

LB: [W]hat are your thoughts on the long term impact of these policy shifts?

CM1: I think there’s a real risk that artists and other cultural practitioners will simply stop choosing to base themselves in Scotland. The visual arts infrastructure which exists in Glasgow is probably the only aspect of

“..You get the drift?”, Creative Scotland CEO Andrew Dixon asks at one point during the interview... And indeed a drift it is – Scotland’s cultural landscape seems to be drifting slowly towards an inevitable drop over the edge, whence we will resurface and find ourselves in completely new territory.

It was interesting, and telling, to read in this the first published interview with Creative Scotland’s CEO of his vision – of how Creative Scotland is indeed “a funding agency, or investment agency as we call it, but we are much more of a promotional body or an advocate for the cultural sector...” Creative Scotland will not just assist and support artists to create, it will also present “the total picture back to Scotland and back to visitors... because [the story has] not been told in the past as postively as it should be so we’re underplaying our strengths.”

Not many artists would argue with having their work promoted more widely, but might this additional task inevitably draw money away from artists’ own grass roots production towards the more bankable and marketable, an official state sanctioned version of Scotland – one that is relentlessly positive and uncritical?

Dixon, perhaps alert to this contention, assures: “we still will invest in straight cultural, individual artist’s projects on artist’s terms. It’s absolutely pivotal to what we do. In fact we will put more money into that.” But does the rhetoric match reality? The most recent available figures (from SAC/ CS ‘09/10) show around 0.1% of all available funding actually got directly to visual artists. ¹ Things can only get better, or can they?

Dixon states “we’re obviously planning a growth budget...” Yet on 22nd September a 2% cut in CS’s budget for 2012-2013 was announced (3.49% in real terms) from £53m to £50.4m.² Sir Sandy Crombie (Chairman of Creative Scotland and independent director of the Royal Bank of Scotland) responded to this announcement on his watch: “This is a welcome expression of confidence in the contribution that the arts, screen and creative industries will make to securing Scotland’s future success.”³

If the income is going down, and the expenditure is going up (due to additional activity around promoting culture, additional remit for creatives industries, etc.) it doesn’t take a banker to realise that a reallocation of resources is coming.⁴

The major change is to how Creative Scotland operates – investing in themselves the position and power to reshape the landscape of the Scottish cultural sector through the intervention of ‘Strategic Commissioning’. This is a regressive move to a more direct form of managing the cultural sector. This can only weaken the sector in both the short term and the long term. There is a fundamental difference between supporting artists, and “inviting them... into a series of conversations which says ‘What more could you do in delivering our objectives in Scotland?’”⁵

What will become of the fate of the Flexibly Funded Organisations (FXOs), who currently get funded on a two year cycle? As Dixon notes, “this is by its very nature very competitive” with 139 organisations bidding for circa £8million, with 60 being successful. “We’re going to get rid of it in two years time”, in March 2013, following review

of each sector. The Corporate Plan notes the purpose is “to review the cultural ecology of key sectors to inform future commissioning of production and touring franchises.”⁶ One web article, obviously based on a press release, suggests that “the current FXO program, which runs through 2012/13, will be replaced by a new £7 million strategic commissioning programme.”⁷ And Dixon suggests that “we would define four or five franchises that we’d then advertise and invite proposals to come forward.”

Dixon’s ecological metaphor seems misplaced given the process of managed change he is advocating.⁸ CS is to consolidate support of larger institutions – the national infrastructure represented by the Foundation Organisations (currently recipients of circa £18million funding). Dixon is explicit: “Once you’ve got the foundations, you want to ask: what else can you build on top of them? Could you make them even stronger? ... Actually, if you gave them a bit more resources, what else could they do?”

This rationalisation process is not so different from that found across the voluntary sector working to a funding model based on service delivery – a legacy of instrumentalism we share. The larger organisations with the capacity to bid and win tenders will supplant or absorb the smaller, more diverse organisations in an unequal struggle for resources. This represents a drift towards the increasing casualisation and instability of work – short term contracts, and a shoring up of the bigger ‘promotional’ cultural organisations at the expense of smaller ‘production’/ ‘support’ organisations, thereby habouring the potential “to lead to an unwelcome stagnant and mono-cultural arts environment.”⁹

Johnny Gailey

Notes

- ¹ ‘A fair share – direct funding for individual artists from UK arts councils’ by Dany Louise, (a-n, The Artists Information Company, 2011) available from: <http://www.a-n.co.uk/publications/article/1558894/1558858>
- ² See Scottish Government budget, at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/10/04153155/17>
- ³ Creative Scotland press release, at: <http://www.creativescotland.com/news/creative-scotland-responds-to-the-scottish-government-budget-171110>
- ⁴ Lottery income is being projected upwards to supplement shortfalls (Andrew Dixon, 9th November 2011), but, importantly, Lottery money is ‘additional’ to statutory spending by government, not a substitute for it, determining any additional allocation should it materialise.
- ⁵ My italics.
- ⁶ My italics. See p.24 of Corporate Plan at <http://www.creativescotland.com/about/our-plans#Plan>
- ⁷ See: http://www.artscampaign.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=431%3Acreative-scotland-releases-10-year-corporate-plan&Itemid=97
- ⁸ For a critique of ‘ecology’, Adam Curtis has explored what he calls: ‘The Use and Abuse of Vegetal Concepts’ - as part of the series ‘All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace’.
- ⁹ ‘Ladders for development: Impact of Arts Council England funding cuts on practice-led organisations’, by Dany Louise (First published: a-n.co.uk May 2011): <http://www.a-n.co.uk/research/article/1300054/1224267>

all this that I can speak about from experience, and I think that its very fragile [...] I would say that the majority, certainly a large proportion, of artists who currently live in Glasgow don't really live here for any reason other than that there's an infrastructure; there are opportunities; there are other artists. This all depends indirectly on a small amount of state support for grassroots activity. There seems to be a shift away from this towards spectacular, highly visible events [...] The whole project seems quite short-sighted. Putting the responsibility to support a diversity of cultural expression to one side, many of the changes that are taking place seem to undermine even the career path that Creative Scotland ostensibly wish to perpetuate and promote. [CM2: Yes] [...] I could imagine there being a funding situation where Transmission will have to join forces with other organisations increasingly to tender for larger budgets to deliver very specific programmes of work [...] I don't know what that means or how that will affect things exactly, but it definitely feels like a watering down to me.

CM2: Also, why would anyone do that at Transmission for free? We're not paid to be here, so that's a big thing as well. There's a huge precarity of all arts workers even if they have a job [...] spaces like this rely on a certain amount of autonomy to be able to function because they're not in it for the job in that sense. It's a huge amount of labour and you do it because you're able to engage on your own terms and on the terms of your community.

CM1: Yes, I absolutely agree with that point. It's really a thing to emphasise.

CM2: And again, there's no mention of that in the interview, not that you'd expect them to mention it, but if they're trying to talk about the 'cultural ecology' or the state of things outside of their sector, it has to be acknowledged. The art world, including the larger foundation funded organisations, rely on that on that

...how is there supposed to be a dialogue when people are afraid to speak about something because if they speak against it, their funding is potentially compromised?

kind of labour to function. And the art community in Glasgow relies on exactly that; a community of people who are here. If that starts to disintegrate then it's going have a huge impact.

LB: Do you think that those discussions are absent from the existing dialogue or is the extent to which the 'cultural ecology', as they would describe it, necessarily functions via precarious labour arrangements something that is silenced?

CM2: Again, it's difficult in this period of transition for people from organisations – and that's reflected in the discussions we've had around anonymity – how is there supposed to be a dialogue when people are afraid to speak about something because if they speak against it, their funding is potentially compromised? And equally, because the access to information is very limited and confusing, it's difficult to speak from a position with certainty, and to engage in a dialogue. So you're more willing to just say "let's see what happens". And then you miss the opportunity – if there is a chance at all, for people to organise against something that they perceive as wrong – because you don't even perceive that it's happening. It's a very blurred distinction in this case of whether dialogue is absent or if it is silenced.

LB: Is there anything else that either of you would like to add or that you'd specifically want me to take away from today's interview?

CM2: I remembered another title of one of the Creative Scotland communications: "Do You Need Fifteen Thousand Pounds?" [laughs] Really reminds me of [...] adverts in the back of really bad magazines.

Jan-Bert, Director of Artlink

Jan-Bert: I've been involved in looking at the transition from the Scottish Arts Council to Creative Scotland through the Cultural Alliance and I thought it'd be useful to reflect on what's happened and where we're at. It's also useful sometimes to understand why things happen and what impact it has. [...] Also, the politics of that change and what's influenced that; in a way the politics of being a funding agency and of being funded. So it's sometimes quite difficult to cut through all of that and clearly understand what that means for culture, because that's also a huge question. A massive question. And I don't know whether all of these subtle changes that we're experiencing are significant or not; whether in the greater scheme of things they have a massive influence. They have an influence in tone, potentially in intent. But I suppose my question to myself is: "how far does tone ultimately change anything?" I don't have an answer to that.

Lisa Bradley: Do you have a gut response?

JB: The gut response is that tone is setting the agenda. And there is a concern that if only tone sets the agenda, and if that tone is not well informed or informed fully, then tone, as in most walks of life, can become more important than it actually should be. [...] On the one hand I think that Creative Scotland has been set an impossible task: to have influence over our creative industries with no resources for that. So that will be one of tone in terms of being seen to be doing something about the creative industries which it has no clear influence over, and possibly nor should it have. And what its function is there to do – and the language has changed – but ultimately it's there to deliver public subsidies. And whether it's there to invest? Well yes, you can call it investment but it's still public subsidy. I think the nature of what that means and what that develops into is something that I watch with interest and trepidation. And I suppose partly I watch it with trepidation because in terms of my day job, I work in a field that is closely connected to social care and closely connected to contracting and commissioning work. And to be quite frank I've not seen any contracting or commissioning that I feel has provided a better service. Now you transport that into cultural activity and it changes the relationship between the commissioner and the commissioned, and partly also changes the nature of that relationship. [...] For me there's a concern that, again, it's all a wee bit back to front at the moment. Back to front in that a corporate plan wasn't produced after the major reviews of organisations with foundation funding had taken place. Now I know that might have been done on purpose, as the review of the organisation could have informed the corporate plan, but because they came out in such quick succession I don't think there's a relationship between the one and the two. [...] I think the strategic reviews that are about to be undertaken, and that have been on the agenda for a long period of time, are more significant.

LB: And in terms of the move from Flexible Funding to Commissioning, do you consider it to be just another example of a new name or is there another, deeper shift happening there?

JB: Who knows? I think that's one of the problems. Yeah, we could read into that a very significant shift and then go to what I've said about Commissioning and different ways of contracting. [...] Commissioning, contracting can be problematic. And from my experience, which is fairly significant, I don't think that contracting – or commissioning – is necessarily appropriate in all realms. But I don't necessarily think that Andrew would disagree with me; in his interview he didn't necessarily disagree with that, I don't think. [...] I think the other concern is that it concentrates responsibility in a very narrow construct at the moment, because Creative Scotland is not like the Scottish Arts Council or Scottish Screen, it doesn't necessarily have the same committee structures behind it at the moment.

LB: Do you feel there is sufficient transparency with the current structure of Creative Scotland to allow practitioners, and also the general public, to pose those questions of responsibility?

JB: Possibly not. But again, it's difficult to tell. The problem is that if you want to be fair and considered, is there enough transparency? Well yes, because funding guidelines are published; ultimately those who are funded will be published; the decision-making process is clear. I'm not sure if, at the moment, there is an opportunity to examine that decision-making process and I feel that is a concern. And I'm again not certain at the moment on how that decision-making process was

informed. And within my own field I sometimes have concerns about that. If one or two people are charged to make decisions about a very broad field of activity and interests, then it is well nigh impossible for those one or two people to have that spectrum of information and understanding to clearly inform their decisions. So, there is a danger that this exposes them to having to make decisions that they can't inform, not because they're not accountable but because it's impossible for them to have that broad spectrum of knowledge. [...] [M]y concern is that if you think about a portfolio manager and an officer, you're still talking about two people having to make decisions about a broad spectrum from within that performance silo, or that visual arts silo, or in that dance silo.

...what's consultation nowadays? It's a set of closed questions to which you can only provide a certain answer.

LB: To what extent do you think that art-from knowledge will inform decision-making, considering the language of investment and Creative Scotland's position within a 'single purpose government'?

JB: I don't know, I think the semantics around it interest me less. I get less excited about what they're calling 'investment'. I think the intent and the relationship between the government and the agency, and then how the agency is charged to fulfil its objective, interest me more. And my understanding and view at the moment is that Creative Scotland has been working pretty hard to

The interview with Andrew Dixon reinforces a concern that there has been a fundamental shift in the role of what was our national arts funding body. It is this – that the 'arms length principle', which was developed in the post war period to guard against central government interference in art and culture, has shifted and that we are now faced with a situation in which that principle has to be invoked between Creative Scotland and art and culture. If this is not a fundamental and dangerous change then we do not know what is. Creative Scotland is now doing the bidding of the Scottish government and, as such, uses the language of management, business and neo-liberalism to do so. At the very least Andrew Dixon concedes that the language used does pose problems for artists and apologises for this. Getting one's head round flexible funding, strategic commissioning, recruiting agencies, targets, artistic programmes and services, core remits, mobile organisations, infrastructure base (one could, it seems, endlessly continue with more of these terms) is far removed from the artist in the studio trying to make her/ his way in the world.

However, it is a forlorn hope that we can rid ourselves of this mangled language. Bearing this in mind we would want to make a very specific point and ask for a clarification. There is still a lack of communication and therefore understanding at 'the coal face' as to what and how the changes Creative Scotland intend to bring about will be implemented. We refer particularly to the stopping of Flexible Funding in favour of Strategic Commissioning. What does Strategic Commissioning actually mean, how will it be defined and what will the process be for 'agencies' to deliver programmes? It seems that Creative Scotland sees Foundation Organisations as 'institutions' with physical requirements and needs while current Flexible Funded Organisations are viewed solely as 'agencies' which suggests light touch, flexible, mobile organisations who can deliver with little overheads.

The reality is that most Flexible Funded Organisations are very 'bricks and mortar' based – with a need for physical premises to deliver artistic programmes and services. If they are to tender for Strategic Commissioning 'franchises' to deliver Creative Scotland targets, how will they be able to pitch for funding to maintain the infrastructure base necessary to be in a position to provide support for artists and audiences? There is a real danger of undermining the roots of these organisations as they 'chase' project funding that may lead them away from core remits and the services that they currently provide for local, national or international communities and audiences. Creative Scotland needs to offer a clear definition and path for the establishment of Strategic Commissioning.

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Sam Ainsley David Harding Alexander Moffat

sustain enough investment in arts, culture and creative industries as it possibly can. I think it's done a pretty good job of that. For that you have to clearly articulate how you meet government's objectives and also how you meet objectives enshrined by law about what you are there to do. [...] [A]t the same time, it gives us all something that we can attach our activities to. And if we're all clever with words – because that's ultimately what we're talking about – then you can call anything, whatever. And actually, in the greater scheme of things it doesn't make a huge amount of difference. To a certain extent I think Creative Scotland's got a job to do: to make sure that the government is satisfied; and carrying out what it's charged with, when. I also think that in terms of the new economics which we all face, it's inevitable that, looking at how creativity informs possibilities, creativity becomes incredibly important.

LB: Do you have any thoughts or experience of how the role of consultation differs in Creative Scotland from the Scottish Arts Council?

JB: [...] [T]here were a lot of organisations that were upset about the lack of involvement in the move towards Creative Scotland. And as that move came off the rails there was a real push towards greater consultation, greater involvement. That seems to have waned; perhaps naturally because people need to find their feet. [...] But consultation, what's consultation nowadays? It's a set of closed questions to which you can only provide a certain answer. Call me cynical but I suppose it's like: what is research? And I think that is clear. Empirical research within culture: I don't necessarily think it exists.

LB: Not focusing on the content of the language, but the shift in language [...] do you feel the change has emerged from a need to communicate to the broader policy context or is it indicative of more conscious effort to change the nature of cultural provision?

JB: I think it's a good question actually, to which I have no clear answer because I think it's too early to tell. I think it's very easy for the cultural sector to start chasing windmills and to start fighting because we feel that the language isn't appropriate to our experience or we feel the language doesn't sit well with us. I think there are dangers in shifting language because you might lose as many opportunities as you might gain. You might lose opportunities because it frightens people or it concerns them. And perhaps that's being utilised on purpose, who knows? That unsettling change period is difficult for those who are used to have having a particular type of relationship with an old funding body and who are now having to establish a new relationship. I also think you have to be very careful in how you use language and what its intention is. In terms of saying they're Commissioning – a type of language – there is concern that using the language whilst being quite clear that you don't know what that means in detail yourselves, is unsettling. Because that basically means it could be

anything. And then my question would be, “why use that language if you're not clear yourself what you actually mean by it?” Because that means that there's an uncertainty which is then spread throughout the cultural infrastructure. And in a way, why do that? But to a certain extent, when you have been around for a while, you kind of go “right, new language”. But it's also about, on the other side, knowing what you're doing and why you're doing it, and how well, or how comfortable you feel, about doing the right thing – the thing that meets your principles, expectations, needs – and then actually relating that to whatever system is out there. It's the same as it was before. And I suppose, partly, I'm incredibly cynical because I've been writing funding applications for the last twenty years, and you change your language according to what your funder wants to hear. [...] I think the problem comes when particular

Why use that language if you're not clear yourself what you actually mean by it? Because that means that there's an uncertainty which is then spread throughout the cultural infrastructure.

barriers are put in place, and partly the commissioning, contracting implication. When you look at that in local authorities it becomes procurement.

LB: Those issues around the non-articulation in Creative Scotland's language; are those questions that you're posing to yourself, or are you discussing them with colleagues?

JB: It's something that we're discussing with colleagues within the Cultural Alliance framework.

LB: Have you sought clarification beyond your discussions within the Cultural Alliance?

JB: Yeah, well, we're starting to. Again, we have to set out these concerns as a way of, I suppose, testing, measuring what the truth is in terms of what the language actually sets up. Again, you have to give people the opportunity to articulate that first. So there's a meeting at the beginning of November to hear more about what's already been around for a few months yet. And I think that's unfortunate, that these terms are around for a while and then they get articulated. And I think that's putting it mildly. [...] What's important within the Cultural Alliance context is the view that that needs to be done constructively and positively. And I think that's right to constructively continue to engage, until such

time when you think: “that's not right and we need to change it”. But I don't think we're at that point by any means at all. And I also think that because the Cultural Alliance is a loose network, that would be more difficult to achieve anyway. It's much better to use it as a network of communication and to make sure that everyone's on the same page. Beyond that it has no real teeth or specific function.

LB: Than rather than me asking you to comment on this unknown trajectory, what do you feel are the important questions to be posed to Creative Scotland in order to reach those concerns over responsibility, clarity and transparency?

JB: Well, you've already answered your question to an extent, it's how is your policy informed, how your decisions are informed. What informs your policy and how far does that look, or not, towards the government? And national outcomes are now everywhere. And how far do you view what is important within the cultural spectrum? There's a mass of questions around that. And also, how can an organisation that's two thirds the size of the two organisations that proceeded it actually be responsible for a much broader spectrum of culture? And how far is that clearly defined and informed? [...] And I think again, if they're informed: brilliant. The problem is, if we don't understand what they mean. And to a certain extent what they're saying to us, we're still figuring it out. That indicates to me there's a need for a dialogue, because if you're figuring it out, you need to talk to people to help you figure it out, and those people are obviously the cultural sector as well as other types of investors, other types of contributors. It's always political.

LB: Perhaps this is an impossible question, but do you know within yourself at what point it will no longer be time to wait and see?

JB: Well I really do think the strategic reviews will be the proof in some of the pudding. I think that that is where Creative Scotland, for the first time, will seriously look at particular art-forms and will seriously articulate its view and response as to what it feels needs to happen. And I assume at that point it will have done two things: one, it will have informed that view fully; and two, it will then take it out to the constituency to get its response. And I think if that's done openly and honestly, and without consultation fatigue or consultation trickery, then that's fine. But I wouldn't expect anything less of it at the moment, I wouldn't expect anything less of Creative Scotland. I wouldn't expect anything less of Andrew. I don't see, at the moment, that Creative Scotland would be setting out to do anything else but.

Where Our Margins Are Being Marginalised

“Culture [...] ‘is what gives us a sense of identity both as individuals and as a nation’. Culture is not simply about ‘image and history’ but about presenting ‘a hard commercial edge’ – Culture, [Chris Smith] affirms ‘lies at the very heart of [the] mission’ of the new government.”¹

“[Creative Scotland] are very committed to not just being a funding body. We are a funding body, or investment agency as we call it, but we are much more of a promotional body and much more of an advocate for the cultural sector [...] The third difference [between Creative Scotland (CS) and that which it removed, The Scottish Arts Council (SAC)] is really the kind of creative industries and the economic side. You know, we still will invest in straight cultural, individual artist's projects on artists' terms. [...] But we've got a remit [...] to support the creative industries and to co-ordinate that and to encourage the likes of Learning and Skills Agencies, Enterprise Agencies, to put their money behind creative industries, whether that'd be the games industry, design, fashion, potentially festivals and to piece together the economic story about the cultural sector.”²

Variant's interview with Andrew Dixon gives witness to the perfect fog of optimistic cant around concrete questions of how Creative Scotland's supersession of axed public funding institutions will impact on practitioners As an artist who relied on the SAC to fund films that otherwise would not have been materially possible, the situation does not leave me with a great deal of hope for the future.

The threat to public funding for contemporary art comes from the eradication of practice-based art form disciplines via an homogenised regional development discourse. It marks a return to a utilitarian criterion of cultural worth, consigning

modernist and avant garde experiments to a slightly embarrassing adolescence that our recumbent, sensible and mature bodies must place safely behind us.

Perhaps art will keep on making money for the few, but the critical functions of art and its avant gardeist potential for effecting new forms of life – of questioning, in particular, how we constitute the self, the other, society – are in danger of unravelling into the most banal exercises in superficial individuation.

The struggle for a system of arts funding that genuinely supports a “diversity of cultural expression (which includes diversity of political expression) as a democratic right”³ is intrinsic to arresting a totalising neo-liberal agenda that has insidiously governed ‘common sense’ since its Thatcherite inception in the UK.

In New York, such neo-liberal ‘free-market’ ideology fast became the new ‘normal’ – art is dominated by the reductive Darwinism of a crony-capitalist market place. At best, a minority of commercially successful artists and enlightened philanthropists manage to sustain a handful of difficult and thoughtful practices. Value is created by a network of anointed taste makers, curators and critics whose own livelihood is often contingent on a system of corporate sponsorship or on moonlighting for private collectors. The money made by a minority of cultural producers infiltrates artistic communities, sometimes divisively.

Scotland is not New York – historically, geographically, socio-economically; they are not interchangeable. But, as public funding is reassigned in Scotland, the important distinctions within modernism between what we could identify today as artist-run spaces and self-organised publications on the one hand, and the museum and the

commercial gallery on the other, are slowly evaporating. Are artists finally wising up to the pervasive mystification of their role within late capitalist society? To our apparent function of ‘added value’ by merely moving into a neighbourhood, sparking a process of gentrification? Can we reject these fictional bohemian identities ascribed to us by the media, curators and dealers? Can we now refuse to be forced into still further competition with one another, to allow every aspect of our life to be placed under scrutiny and exploited in the form of cultural capital in the service of a chimerical creative economy? Can Creative Scotland act as a mediating force in this refusal, allowing us to retain autonomy and nurturing our diversity of opinion and expression? If not, and we ignore our radical independent past and swallow the market model of culture wholesale, then I fear we are doomed to a collective impotence. If we allow it, in Creative Scotland I envisage a future where corporate populism has become the final arbiter of value. As practitioners we are left bewildered.

Luke Fowler

Notes

- 1 Speech by Chris Smith, Secretary of state for Culture, Media and Sport, New Labour (1997) cited in T. Bewes and J. Gilbert, Cultural Capitalism, Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 7-8
- 2 Andrew Dixon, Chief Executive of Creative Scotland, interviewed by Daniel Jewesbury, Variant, issue 41, Spring 2011
- 3 ‘From Funding To Franchise (Workshop) - What does the end of Flexible Funding mean for artist-run spaces in Scotland?’ 25th June 2011, Transmission Gallery <http://www.variant.org.uk/events/FtF/FtF.html>

Boredom in the Charnel House

Theses on ‘Post-industrial’ Ruins

John Cunningham

“Our capital of misery remains intact down through the ages; yet we have one advantage over our ancestors; that of having *invested* our capital better, since our disaster is better organised.”¹

E.M Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*

1/ Suggestive Boredom

A friend recently sent me a poem that explained his dissatisfaction and boredom with urban decay and industrial ruins. He wrote much of the poem via one of the automatic text generators that often give the best lines:

“Sick of ruins/ sick of meaning of ruins/ ruined/ decay/ blight/ derelict/ poetry/ heavy bricks/ getting heavy/ sick of work/ getting sick/ labour history/ dead city/ history dead/ city labour/ dead city/ invading ruins/ my apologies/ my theft/ sick of poverty/ sick of ruins...”

And so on... I find it easy to share this bored, angry scepticism towards the fetishism of crumbling concrete, cracked windows and hidden wastelands. In the image world of hopefully ‘late’ capitalism the industrial ruin has acquired a fair amount of *cultural* capital and such spectacular over-determination is a major reason for ennui with corroded concrete. At the more rarefied end of this are the auteurs of ruin images, professional photographers whose work appears in the gallery and in well designed coffee table books to be displayed, gazed at and stroked as ruin pornography. A recent example would be *The Ruins of Detroit* by the photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, a book that documents the decomposition of the motor city.² Such books – in their capture of something as ephemeral as the ruin in a beautifully bound hardback – always

outlines of the new industrial architecture had the same “monumental force” as the “constructions of Ancient Egypt”.⁴ Whereas photography was instrumental in adding impetus to this ‘new age’ it now documents the dissolution of the recent past and present.⁵ Images of ‘post’ industrial ruins are also diffused throughout the web on sites such as ‘Artificial Owl’ and throughout Flickr groups – the group pool ‘Abandoned’ has 502,641 images alone though my personal favourite is one called ‘Rusty and Crusty’. Also, this contemporary imaginary of ruins feeds into a broader stream of more overtly apocalyptic representations of disaster and decay such as the TV series *Life After People* with its digitally enhanced images of empty metropolises simply disintegrating and returning to nature after the mysterious disappearance of humanity.⁶

For something as ephemeral as the ruin – the slow decomposition of spatial form in time – the best approach is a fragmentary one. The following is a series of provisional theses upon the decomposition of the contemporary ruin grasped through image and text. In line with this ephemerality and the over determination of everything in spectacular capitalism the following should be viewed as theoretical fictions, transitory attempts to formulate concepts of what is falling apart. This is the first thesis: ‘ruins boredom’ is a suggestive affect in that it is constituted by and through the contemporary metropolis. Walter Benjamin, connoisseur of the arcades – the ruins of 19th century commodity capitalism – wrote that, “Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks.”⁷ How might boredom with ruins be turned inside out and industrial ruin capital re-invested as anti-capitalist critique?

2/ Surrealist Slapstick

It’s best to enact a Surrealist style of critical slapstick, knocking the fragments of ruins together in dysfunctional assemblages and then pulling them apart to see how they function. The term ‘ruin’ operates as both a noun and verb in that it describes an object – that lump of concrete over there – and also describes a process as in to ruin something whether its a building, discourse, socio-economic order or whatever. The critical task is to ruin the ruins and grasp the contemporary ruinscape as a contradictory object implicit to capitalism. Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, the juxtaposition of past and present to provide revolutionary impetus and historical materialist understanding will be central to this. But there’s an important revision to be made to the dialectical image in considering the so-called ‘post’ industrial ruin. Whereas Walter Benjamin pulled the decaying arcades of mid 19th century commodity capitalism out of the past to illuminate his then present the contemporary ruin doesn’t leave us that luxury. The afore mentioned decaying Packard plant in Detroit dates from 1903 and was part of the vast movement of population that saw the population of the city leap from 285,704 in 1900 to 993,678 in 1920 but it would be a mistake to consign this to a long distant Fordism.⁸ Exploitation never goes out of fashion and in terms of this we are not ‘post’ anything as the temporal frame of the dialectical image draws in closer. The movement of labouring bodies to meld with technology continues massively in China and elsewhere even as the flight of capital to where labour is cheap leads to the evacuation of the older Fordist zones of the west. For instance Detroit, home of Henry Ford and the development of mass production had a population density of 14,400 in 1950 that had declined to 6,500 by 2007.⁹ Detroit is the most extreme example of such an emptying out

of population as part of a process of the ruination or becoming ruin of a city.

This too is part of our present and this evacuation of proletarian subjects is ably attested to by the formal qualities that define photographic representations of the contemporary ruin. The visual tropes are those of the *empty space* – there are rarely people photographed in such images – and any humanity is exhibited by the *trace* of their past presence. To this can be added an emphasis upon the monumentality of the ruins of contemporary capitalism as being as overbearing in their decline as they ever were as sites of production and social reproduction. All of these tropes are heavily represented in *The Ruins of Detroit* but are also standard in the flickering repetition of such images on the web. As such *The Ruins of Detroit* provides a good basis for considering the representation of the industrial ruin. Sure, ruins tend to be empty and exhibit traces of previous use but there’s something suggestive in this conjunction of emptiness and a disappeared subject. So the second thesis: The *empty space* suggests in this absence the *traces* of the subject usually embodied in everyday detritus, graffiti, etc. The question is what kind of subject might appear in the decay of the factories, apartment blocks and shopping malls that characterise the capitalist metropolis.

3/ Ruined Passivity

Or it might even be a case of the formation of a particular subject through a diffusion of images since how we act and respond is partly mediated through such images in spectacular capitalism. The mechanical reproduction of the camera is a surgical instrument that can reveal landscape but with much documentation of this kind the urban body revealed is lump, inert and reified. The ruins of our present lend themselves in these very formal, panoramic and usually monumental images to an aura of the sublime that-like natural disasters – provide a compelling immersive spectacle. There’s a sense in that they reproduce the viewing subject as a consumer of dereliction, the images mediating the ruin as a theme park to be drifted through. A certain distance is necessary to enjoy the accumulation of debris since who would want to live in a ruin? Images of the contemporary ruinscape present the *aestheticisation* of the destruction of the world in much the same way that 20th century avant gardes such as the Futurists enjoyed the bluster of warfare. Except what is lacking in these images of our dereliction is the passion and joy that animated the parodic virility of the Futurists. Aestheticised might be better read as anaesthetised affect since *The Ruins of Detroit* for all the wide screen flourish and detail of the images gives me the sense that all of this has simply been curated for the sake of distraction and gazing-or perhaps grazing – upon the ruins. The lack of affect present in such acts of curation is even more accentuated in the repetition of the curating impulse on the web. As the tags of urban decay, abandoned, trashed, etc. accumulate on the screen it’s so much cool stuff to collect and some days I’d be tempted to agree. Even the descendents of the admittedly great street artist John Fekner who stencilled “Decay” (or DK) and “Broken Promises” on the debris of the South Bronx in the 1980s end up simply contributing to the affectless edginess of the cultural reproduction of urban decay; stencils and other forms of street art are so widespread in London that they add to the nausea of both pockets of gentrification and urban degeneration.

This process of the subjectification of a passive,



Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre: *The Ruins of Detroit*

have a permanence about them that can’t help but remind me of the precarity attached to dwelling, health and jobs in the contemporary city.

The book is a fairly exhaustive – and often quite beautiful if ruins are your thing – documentation of the decline of Detroit from Fordist production with its monumental architecture of factories, department stores and apartment blocks hymning the myths of the modern to the decomposition of the city into monumental ruin. The image of the huge decaying Packard plant resembling a concrete and iron pre-historic grotto encrusted with stalagmites puts an entirely new spin upon Le Corbusier’s view of “factories [as] the reassuring first fruits of the new age”.³ But this ‘new age’ of industrial (re)production always carried with it a whiff of the archaic even if usually invoked to underscore the grandeur of modernism. Modernist architect Walter Gropius boasted that the sleek

Don Leicht, John Fekner's collaboration (1980) at the site of the People's Convention held at Charlotte Street, the South Bronx. Messages included *Decay*, *Broken Promises*, *Falsas Promesas*, *Last Hope*, *Broken Treaties* and *Save Our School*.

neutralised subject might seem too much to read from the diffusion of images of dereliction but the theme park or art space is also immanent to the contemporary ruin. For instance, photographer and ruin auteur Camilo José Vergara proposed with a kind of blank irony that the ruinscape of Detroit be preserved as a museum of US capitalism.¹⁰ It's worth noting that in Germany the industrial detritus of the Ruhr valley and the mining areas of the ex-Stalinist Eastern part of the country have already been transformed into such a museum of Fordism. In an essay upon this, Kirstin Barndt goes so far to write of a "transformation of the subject" from worker to leisured (or unemployed) consumer and a "new landscape of affect" produced through the aestheticisation of dereliction and its preservation as a post-industrial playpen with walkways, art galleries and perfectly preserved ruins.¹¹

The presumed non-identity of a ruined space with the day to day operations of spatial production and consumption is utilised – alongside other discourses and institutions, artistic as well as economic – to reproduce essentially passive subjects. The debris of the post-industrial ruin can be an element of the apparatuses – diffuse assemblages of discourses, institutions, economic processes, etc. – that produce both subjectivity and space.¹² Even the industrial ruin can be subsumed within the bio-political governmentality of contemporary capitalism that seeks to (de)form the subject and ensure receptivity and productivity. And what might be termed affective subjects are partially produced through such spaces. As Ganser, the project director of one of the 'post' industrial theme parks in Germany comments: "People feel better, even though objectively the economic situation remains unchanged".¹³ This can also be shaped as configuring nostalgia in the shape of mourning for the past, a past where the local population was not quite as surplus to the requirements of capital. "People feel better" is as good a motto as any for the disciplinary apparatuses of contemporary capitalism. The point of this is not to moralise or rant about the supposed emptiness, commodification or lack of meaning inherent in spectacular capitalism since all of that can be taken for granted. Instead, it's to place images of the dereliction of the present in wider field of images, discourses, institutions and economic processes that contribute to the management and production of subjectivity. What initially Michel Foucault and latterly Giorgio Agamben have termed apparatuses or *dispositifs* of bio-political governmentality. Agamben writes that an apparatus can be "literally anything that has [...] the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings".¹⁴ In this case ruin images are relatively marginal phenomena that can contribute to this: a ruin apparatus.

It's a fitting mirror image that the proto-typical bio-political sites such as factories that sought to reproduce proletarianised bodies as workers should contribute to the over-determination of subjectivity in their decline. No wonder Andre Breton linked the ruin with the mechanical mannequin in the first Surrealist manifesto as examples of the uncanny or 'marvellous'; though at this point there seems little of the 'marvellous' about the imbrication of the subject with the spaces of the metropolis. The mechanical mannequin can easily be seen as an image of the new industrialised bodies required by factories organised by the repetitive gestures of the production line and formed through this technology. But there's a trace of a more

oppositional subject-worker in this that used the concentration of population around these sites to discover new forms of resistance and organisation. The worker as mechanical mannequin was always on the point of malfunctioning and upending the sites of her own (re)production. This is another trace contained in these images of decomposing buildings and ruin theme parks. A melancholy anti-capitalist remnant of the figure of the mass worker who revealed the conflictual basis of the 'golden age' of Fordism in mimetic forms of a resistance – such as mass organisation – based upon the novelty of industrial production.

Thesis three can be: the image of the contemporary ruin is part of the apparatuses that seek a governmentality that produces neutralised and passive subjects. This is one of the *traces* of the subject always to be found in the contemporary ruin.

4/ Archaic Bio-Politics

Contemplating the ruins of the past led to the cultural pessimism of the early 20th century philosopher and apocalypse fanatic Oswald Spengler. In his *Decline of the West* the "exhaustion of forms (of civilisation) that have become inorganic or dead"¹⁵ reveals itself in cyclical forms of history that mirror the corrosive rhythms of nature. This is a prototype of bio-politics as Spengler writes: "Mankind appears to me as a zoological quantity. I see no progress, no goal, no avenue for humanity, except in the heads of the Western progress-Philistines..."¹⁶ This finds an echo in the melancholy of a ruin gaze that assimilates the abandoned or urban decay and emphasises the universal hubris to be found in the contemporary ruin. As one of the accompanying texts in *The Ruins of Detroit* notes, these ruins are, "A natural and sublime demonstration of our human destinies and of their paradoxes. A dramatisation of our creative and self-destructive vanities."¹⁷ Ideally for capital, we graze upon the ruins suspended between being passive consumers and easily managed forms-of-life that can be twisted around the capitalist dynamic partially revealed in the ruin. In this view ruins – like capitalism – will always be with us and this pessimism would be a stance that affirms this up to the 'zoological' negative bio-politics of human animals scrabbling around in the rubble. This is a dead zone that dissolves the verticality of both buildings and rational human form into immersive 'zoological' cycles where nature and history become indistinct. Such a cultural pessimism just reflects the 'natural' cycles of economic creation and destruction that constitute a currently self destructing element in the self-image of capital.

An example of the naturalisation of the ruin is found in the work of the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel. He wrote in 1913 that "it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature."¹⁸ And Simmel – despite being an astute thinker of the urban metropolis – judged this decomposing reconciliation to be a good thing. The slow revealing through the ruin of the hubris of humanity in the midst of natural decay undercut the pretensions of human agency and autonomy. The ruin as a romantic remnant, where it's possible to glimpse an enclave of supposedly unmediated nature reasserting itself through a cessation of the production of things and buildings is part of both the past and contemporary phantasmagoria of ruins. Tendrils of nature insinuated into stone as the reconciliation of nature and humanity in decomposition is part of an essentially romantic concept of the ruin. This trans-historical pessimism finds its own natural resting place



in contemporary fantasies of a deep green restoration of Nature wherein hunter gatherers would play in the ruins of industrialism. There's a harsher version of this found in a short story by Detroit native Thomas Ligotti in the shape of a parable of non-reconciliation between nature and industrial production. In the story *The Red Tower*, the eponymous tower is a factory gradually being ruined by the entropic influence of the surrounding wasteland. The factories production of increasingly horrific novelties conflicts with a tendency towards nothingness embodied in the surrounding natural landscape. The story is marked by the lack of any human subjects as an interface between factory production and natural wasteland; a produced 'second nature' of factory and commodity is in irreconcilable conflict with a supposedly primary first nature. The nameless narrator and other human subjects are reduced to recording devices:

"[T]hey are always talking, in one deranged way or another, about the Red Tower [...] Unless, of course, they begin to speak about that grey and desolate landscape, that hazy void in which the Red Tower – the great and industrious Red Tower – is so precariously nestled."¹⁹

Images of the industrial ruin are similarly caught between the infusion of nature and

device for history might also be a clearing away of a delusion that was always built upon labouring bodies anyway.

5/ Charm of Ruins

It's necessary to drift further away from the image in order to investigate the psychogeographical attraction to the ruin. This exists in an uneasy symbiosis with the mediation of post-industrial ruins through the abstraction of the photographic image. Psychogeography often functions as an index of dissatisfaction with contemporary urban space while simultaneously mapping its effects upon subjectivity and affect. A recurrent trace of this dissatisfaction is found in the psychogeographical penchant for the ruin, the decayed left over space that suspends the remaking of the city in the (self) image of capitalism. The Situationist Guy Debord wrote after discovering a disused 18th century tollhouse in the Place de la Stalingrad in Paris that it was a "virtual ruin left in an incredible state of abandonment, whose charm is singularly enhanced by the curve of the elevated subway line that passes at close distance".²⁰ Psychogeography has always thrived upon such juxtapositions between a projected image of the gleaming 'new' – heavily regulated spaces sponsored by capital – and the human remnants, memories and ruins of urban space. The 'charm' of the disused tollhouse for Debord probably arose from this but also from it being an 18th century neo-classical facsimile of the architecture of ancient Rome. But what might differentiate this from a simple aestheticisation of the ruin? This might be found in the 'charm' of time doing its work upon the pretensions of French state power that sought to enshrine its commercial transactions in the monumentality of past ages. It's in this that the more astute anti-capitalist utopian trace of the ruin resides. This is both in the revealing of the ephemeral qualities of socio-economic structure and in the merest hint of the possibility of non-productive spaces that might be productive of non- capitalist relations. Even if these utopian traces are only imaginary possibilities hatched out of the musings of a psychogeographer.

It's in this that the destructive 'charm' of ruins resides in suggesting that all such pretensions to monumentality can be dissolved by time and – even if only by re-imagining the city while drifting – through oppositional agency. It's difficult to rediscover such a charm of ruins in the contemporary metropolis. In London post-industrial ruins seem little more than urban degeneration in the midst of repetitive attempts to (re)inflate the property market and British capitalism through an increasingly desperate gentrifying 'regeneration'. Every decaying warehouse or graffiti adorned industrial shell has germinating within it a block of luxury flats. These usually contain the requisite – though slightly humble – 'affordable' or social housing apartments carefully cordoned off in case they infect the remainder of the development. Class relations that UK plc would love to elide appear in concrete lower down in the new development with smaller balconies or sequestered off in a separate section altogether. The surrealism of empty shop fronts – dismembered mannequins, commodity fragments, trashed cash registers – all too easily turn into a state subsidised collective art space that provides the illusion of cultural regeneration. It's this aspect of the ruin that is at the core of ennui with it. Boredom arises through this repetition-dead capitalised time endlessly repeating – and the capitalist processes that produce everyday space manifest in an all too obvious way.

Ruin divided by Gentrification equals Capital, and further down the line equals more ruin for those prole's excluded from this primitively accumulative equation. For instance, one of the most iconic contemporary ruins in London is the vast crumbling network of one thousand plus ex-social housing flats – though one or two tenants continue to hold out – called the Heygate Estate. It was evacuated of tenants in a series of classically 'democratic' local government 'consultations' – keep voting and consulting but you'll still be evicted at the behest of property developers – and capitalism's systemic dream of another empty space to fill with yuppie hutches was fulfilled.²¹

This particular ruin was summoned into existence by the systemic necessities of capitalism at the expense of any existing social fabric. When we see a post-industrial ruin we should also see the inhuman subject called capital winking and leering at us in its own cyclical reproduction. We can't even wear our boredom as a "sign of distinction" – as Walter Benjamin wrote of the 19th century flaneur – since our boredom with ruins often presages our own possible ejection from the neighbourhood. Even in Detroit – the alpha and omega of urban decay – the gentrification of the city centre continues at the expense of the expanse of a rapidly decomposing periphery. As Bill McGraw writes in his excellent overview of the decline of Detroit: "They might be pouring more designer beers in new downtown clubs these days, but elsewhere in Detroit, the bricks continue to crumble".²²

As such, thesis five *might* be: if predicated upon the aesthetic 'charm' of ruins psychogeography might be utterly exhausted as a tactical, theoretical resource. But this doesn't exhaust psychogeography and the critical potentiality of ruins altogether. This 'charm' also demonstrates that such cycles of the creative/destructive (re) production of capitalism aren't an eternal verity and are part of specific relations of production. There's a suggestive image in *The Ruins of Detroit* that reoccurs around three or four times from different derelict spots. It's of a window rendered opaque and cracked almost blocking out the view of further dereliction in the distance. Negatively, this suggests the regime of transparency that the contemporary capitalist metropolis aspires to architecturally in the reflective glass of offices and shopping malls, the dream of a space transparent to both control and the flows of capital. The contemporary ruin at least suggests the uneven qualities of such a transparent homogenisation of the city. Elemental to the industrial ruin as a wish image is that it might constitute a space that is opaque to the transparency of capital, unproductive on capital's terms, a splinter in the eye of the reflective surfaces of the metropolis. In actuality, one relies upon the other: no increasingly transparent space without the supposed opacity of disused buildings and urban degeneration. Gentrification, theme parks and the ruin-image apparatus demonstrate the industrial ruin is produced within the same spatial and economic regimes.

However, the myth of opacity – the memory or potential existence of spaces that are more opaque to the productive apparatuses of the contemporary metropolis – can at least provide a critical tool against transparency. This is used to good effect by the artist-photographer Jorge Ribalta who reconstructed and photographed scale models of the 'urban decay' of working class districts of Barcelona prior to their gentrification. As John Roberts writes, this is an elegy to "an area that once had a rich and variegated social and economic history" now designated by capital as "unproductive".²³ Such an approach mobilises the 'opacity' of urban decay – and memory – against the transparent homogenisation that capital desires for city space while emphasising the simultaneous production of both. In light of this Thesis Five can be: Psychogeography or photography as critique can puncture the inter-related phantasmagorias of both an opaque urban decay and transparency if one is utilised against the other. The utopian trace of the ruin is in the forms of decomposition revealed as immanent to capitalism and then utilised as critique. This rests upon the negative apprehension of the ruin rather than seeing in it the embodiment of a utopian aspect in the everyday. But where might this leave the starting point of the images of urban decay and the ruin?

6/ Fantasies of Non-Reproduction

None of this is to say that the representation of such ruins can't also carry a certain melancholic jolt to the imagination. *The Ruins of Detroit* contains images of a cop station left abandoned as though it had just been assaulted by insurrectionists, bureaucratic documents and id photographs left scattered. What could be termed the apocalyptic 'shock-value' of the ruin image resides in something like this. Were



Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre: *The Ruins of Detroit*

an equally inhuman economic order. What is suggestive about *The Red Tower* and *The Ruins of Detroit* is that both are characterised by a naturalised entropic drift into dissolution that elides any human agency or reduces such to the status of an eye or voice that simply records the process of ruination. More than this, the *trace* of the human is both passive and ineluctably subject to an erasure by inhuman processes that suggest an end to capitalism that is based upon an industrial ecological catastrophe.

All of this suggests that the industrial ruin is a wish image of contemporary capitalism. Like an inverted image of the 'utopian traces' that Walter Benjamin glimpsed in the commodity culture of the 19th century but rather than projecting a 'phantasmagoria' of the reconciliation of humanity and nature through the commodity these images of corroded factories and trashed apartment blocks suggest a fantasy of a ever returning non-reproduction of the cogs that keep production revolving. And these cogs aren't just the fixed capital of buildings and technology but also the human appendages of capital. The important point to grasp is that in the image it's all too easy to project this as a natural, frozen and neutralised process rather than one that is contingent and historical. The passivity and neutralisation of the gazing subject is mirrored by that subject's essentially passive role within the decomposition of the ruin. Thesis four: the pessimism of the industrial ruin dissolves the image of progress up to the destruction or decomposition of the 'human' into a 'zoological quantity'. The naturalisation of destruction is a naturalisation of capitalism. But this also leads to the question of how to denaturalise decomposition, underline its production within capitalism and discover within the dissolution of capitalist 'progress' a utopian trace not based upon 'Nature' and a pessimism not based upon a 'zoological' destiny. The decomposition of teleological narratives of human progress is not necessarily fodder for the endless cyclical creation and destruction of capital. The collapse of 'progress' as a piloting

it not the simple result of cycles of capitalist (de)valuation then such an image might be subtitled ‘We are not afraid of ruins’ as the Spanish Civil War anarchist Durutti famously stated. A similar pessimistic delight in the ruin is found in the Surrealist Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant*. As he contemplates the everyday life of the decaying arcades and the rapidly approaching ‘modernisation’ that will destroy them Aragon imagines an encounter with the player of an accordion upon which is written ‘Pessimism’. As the instrument is played “the whole thing starts wailing from left to right essimism-pssimism [...] pessimism [...] pes-pe-p-p... nothing more”.²⁴ While in the phantasmagoria of the 20th century the regeneration of the metropolis occurred under the sign of ‘progress’ our own urban renovation is blunter and has no need for such metaphysical niceties. Aragon excavated and examined the 19th century arcades of Paris for subversive potentiality as though they were a buried ancient civilisation. The obsolescent remnants of an earlier form of commodity capitalism were an unbidden spatial unconscious. Thus, “when the pickaxe menaces them” the arcades suggest to Aragon that “Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today’s” and the ephemeral decomposition of commodified space becomes evident. ‘Progress’ for Surrealists such as Aragon was already undercut and outmoded without the intercession of a mythical nature. This is another image of the ruin – different from the capitalised cosmological cycles outlined above – that needs to be attended to, the hubris of the outmoded commodities and buildings of capital.

Through its abstraction of dereliction in the image of industrial dereliction there’s revealed a similarly pessimistic but critical element of the way capitalist abstractions – labour, commodity, value – work in the world. The standard trope of most such images – and this is very prevalent in *The Ruins of Detroit* – is the monumental, looming depiction of emptied out factories and apartment blocks as being totally devoid of people. What can be apprehended in these emptied out images is the actuality of the contemporary industrial ruin as the decomposing embodiment of capitalist abstraction in the shape of dead labour. And rather than being the unconscious aspects of space that harboured the ‘marvellous’ for Aragon and the Surrealists this is a banal secret that *The Ruins of Detroit* underscores in its details of dereliction. That is, these derelict buildings depicted in *The Ruins of Detroit* have accumulated the sweat of living labour over the generations then been destroyed as the reproductive cycle between capital and proletariat is cut by the necessity of capital to valorise itself either in a more fictional, financial form or to begin its flight elsewhere. A *surplus* but proletarianised living labour is still dominated – if not exploited – by the ghost of capital continuing to animate the corpses of past dead labour in the shape of a repetitive refrain of ‘This world was not built for you’. Or what Georg Lukacs memorably described as a ‘charnel house’ of reified subjectivity, frozen as second nature.²⁵ While Lukacs risked missing the essential transitoriness that such second nature always carries this formulation catches much of the banal, monumental qualities of urban decay imagery and is the last *trace* of the subject within it. And while not actively built *for* a labouring (or non-labouring) proletariat – except to reproduce humanity as labour – the ruin as dead labour restores a more contingent element to the industrial ruin by underlining its *produced* quality. The essential *trace* of the *empty space* are the proletarianised subjects who originally designed, built, worked in and inhabited these ruins realised in this absence. Industrial ruins are a signifier of the becoming surplus to capitalism of a significant part of this proletariat.

The contemporary ruinscape as depicted in books such as *The Ruins of Detroit* and the repetition of such images on the web are in their emptiness redolent of such a surplus population in both the developed zones of the west and more strikingly in the global south. This is to make absolutely clear a population surplus to the requirements of capital – unemployed, marginalised, precarious – not to itself and this is the *negative* ‘utopian trace’ of post-industrial ruins.²⁶ To put it plainly, the severing of the

reproductive cycle between proletariat and capital as a structural necessity for capital opens up the potentiality of a future without capitalism. This is also part of the ‘charm’ of ruins though whether it’s also an element in our contemporary phantasmagoria of wish images only time will tell. Thesis six is: the ruin as an *empty space* that might herald the non-reproduction of capitalism is a seductive image and certainly constitutes part of any utopian trace it might have for the present. Perhaps, Benjamin’s (in)famous ‘angel of history’ – as much as being horrified by the accumulated debris he see’s behind him – might not be able to resist a sly smile and a wink as the debris is piled ever higher.²⁷

Notes

- 1 E.M Cioran, Trans: Richard Howard, *A Short History of Decay*, UK: Penguin, 2010, p.184.
- 2 Yves Marchand , Romain Meffre, Robert Polidori and Thomas J Sugrue, *The Ruins of Detroit*, Steidl, 2010.
- 3 Le Corbusier quoted in Gillian Darley, *Factory (Objekt)*, London: Reaktion Books, 2003, p.136.
- 4 Walter Gropius, *ibid*, p.138.
- 5 As the *Architectural Reviews* editor Philip Morton Shand said in 1934, “did modern photography beget modern architecture or the reverse?”, *ibid*, p.136. Though Eugene Atget’s photographs of ragpickers in the late 19th century suggest that an awareness of dust, decay, detritus and the marginal workers who worked amongst such was already a concern with photographers.
- 6 See Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, UK: Zero Books, 2010, pp.174-179.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, Trans: Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge (USA)/ London (UK): Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, p.105.
- 8 Bill McGraw, ‘Historians in the Streets’, *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 63, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.292. An excellent article by a Detroit resident, journalist and historian that traces the history of Detroit and has much to say about both ruin pornography and gentrification.
- 9 Bill McGraw, *ibid*, p.293.
- 10 See Gerry Coulter, ‘Ruined America’, *EuroArt and Beyond*, Issue 14, 2011, available here: <http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/?page=1&content=129>. Also: <http://invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html>.
- 11 Kirstin Barndt, ‘Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures’, in Julia Hell and Andreas Schonle (Ed), *Ruins of Modernity*, USA: Duke University Press, 2010, pp.273 and 277.
- 12 This is outlined in Giorgio Agamben’s text ‘Metropolis’, available here: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/69377415/Agamben-Metropolis>
- 13 *Ruins of Modernity*, *Ibid*, p.277.
- 14 Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus*, US: Stanford University Press, 2009, p.14.
- 15 Oswald Spengler, quoted in Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay*, New York: Peter Lang, 2006, p.225.
- 16 Oswald Spengler, *ibid*, p.115.
- 17 Yves Marchand , Romain Meffre, Robert Polidori and Thomas J Sugrue, *The Ruins of Detroit*, Steidl, 2010.
- 18 Georg Simmel, ‘The Ruin’, *Hudson Review*, USA, 11:3 (1958:Autumn).
- 19 Thomas Ligotti, ‘The Red Tower’, *Teatro Grottesco*, UK: Virgin Books, 2008, p.76.
- 20 Guy Debord in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, USA: MIT Press, 1998, p.72.
- 21 See the excellent website Southwark Notes for much bile, whinging and critique of this: <http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/>
- 22 Bill McGraw, *ibid*, p.14.
- 23 John Roberts, ‘Photography, Landscape and the Social Production of Space’, *Philosophy of Photography*, Vol.1:2, p.140.
- 24 Louis Aragon, Trans: S.W. Taylor, *Paris Peasant*, UK: Picador, 1987, pp.61 and 29.
- 25 Georg Lukacs, Trans: Anna Bostock, *The Theory of the Novel*, UK: Merlin Press, p.32.
- 26 For more detail on the concept of surplus population see ‘Misery and Debt’, *Endnotes* here: <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/1>
- 27 “His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread [...] His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.” Walter Benjamin, Trans: Harry Zohn, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations*, UK: Harperrcollins, 1992, p.249.

Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre: *The Ruins of Detroit*



Art of Protest

On Testing Cultural Forms of Resistance

Katarzyna Kosmala

in conversation with Oliver Ressler

This year has been, in large part as a response to the consequences of an increasingly brutal neoliberalism, a year of ongoing political unrest. People across the globe have taken to the streets in confronting economic and other inequalities and assaults on basic human rights, demanding an end to oppression, exploitation and repression.

In many countries these events, struggles and movements have recognised the centrality of mainstream medias in manufacturing and maintaining consent to neoliberal policies and relations of oppression. As such, there has been recognition of the importance of access to alternative communications (including social media networks) and to the existence, evolution and creation of critical/radical media alternatives.

The following exchange, exploring the role of politically engaged art in protest and human rights issues, is a continuation of a public talk between Katarzyna Kosmala and Oliver Ressler at the CCA, Glasgow, reflecting on Ressler's recent films: *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* and *Comuna Under Construction*, screened at Document 9: International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival on 21st October 2011.

Document provides a rare public platform in Scotland for debating possibilities and alternatives that speak to the necessity of living, thinking and acting differently. This exchange is intended as a contribution to Document's inspiring vision for politically engaged cultural practices.

Katarzyna Kosmala: Protest is not necessarily a purely political statement; a protest can be viewed as a cultural form of resistance. To start with, it is worth reflecting upon whether gesture or gestural forms of expression can make a real difference. You have been producing exhibitions and various projects in public spaces since 1994, and made films that address forms of resistance for nearly 20 years now. You reflect upon socio-political and economic alternatives in your work. How do you see the role of the arts in protest, drawing on the examples from your own art practice?

Oliver Ressler: I think art can have a crucial function for an analysis of the current political and economic situation, in expressing criticism, connecting to existing social movements and in thinking about alternative ways about how to organise our societies. There are multiple roles art can play directly in protest. It is a central idea in my artistic practice to give a voice to protagonists of social movements around the world, and to create a certain space through my work where these voices can be heard and be listened to. I am not interested in a balanced, "neutral" perspective (some media forms claim it exists!), but in a perspective emerging from the inside, or at least a perspective born out of participation and in solidarity with particular leftist social movements. My work often takes the form of a film production. I am interested in creating a tangible tool that can be used by the movements themselves for

reflection, education and mobilisation purposes, and to contribute – through the creation of a film – to render their aims and activities spread around the world and made visible internationally. For example, my films on the alter-globalisation movements, such as *This Is What Democracy Looks Like!*, *Disobbedienti* and *What Would It Mean to Win?* were used numerous times by the movements in question to inform and to mobilise upcoming demonstrations and activities against the G8, WTO, IMF or WEF. I have also created banners and posters for the alter-globalisation movement, which helped in mobilising demonstrations and blockades at the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in Germany in 2007, for example. But I don't believe that art should limit itself to tasks such as these; making material objects or producing visual material for demonstrations. Artists should get involved in different aspects of organising and dispersing activism, and, as a long-term goal, somehow aim at overcoming these boundaries between art and activism in practice.

KK: In both films, *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* And

Comuna Under Construction, the protagonists share their personal experience of crisis and change; the viewer gets the insight into their own micro-struggles to survive. Both films are situated in precarious contexts, first in Armenia in Yerevan's largest bazaar, and second in Caracas' periphery, in los barrios, and in the countryside in Venezuela. You have said that making films is something that really interests you. It would be good to reflect on your approach to the film production, in particular with reference to the process of filming and editing.

OR: *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* and *Comuna Under Construction* are quite differently produced. While *Socialism Failed...* is based on interviews with the impoverished traders in a bazaar in Yerevan, Armenia, about their difficult living and working conditions and their hopes for change, *Comuna Under Construction* is based on recordings of the community assemblies and the project tables of the Community Councils in Venezuela, that were developed by the people themselves in acts of self-empowerment. There is of course a big difference between the process of filming in Venezuela incorporating participant observation method, and the interview-based approach in Armenia. On *Comuna Under Construction*, which was developed in collaboration with the political analyst Dario Azzellini, the co-director of the film (it is already our third film on the political processes in Venezuela made since 2004), I worked with a team of five people, and we tried to record as many of these assemblies as possible in a limited time-frame of a few weeks in order to develop a film from this material in the course of a lengthy editing process. In the case of *Socialism Failed...* I had almost no budget to make the film and worked together solely with the local activist Arpineh Galfayan, who carried out the interviews for me and helped with the translation.

KK: Participatory art is based on a process that reflects a paradigm shift; a shift from material objects to subjects. Such a shift has been greatly influenced by philosophical and political theories (e.g. Jean-Luc Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*, Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*), discourse that is now appropriated by post-conceptual art as well as socially and politically engaged art, or as language is now incorporated into various forms of art activism. How did participatory process feature in the production of these films and your works more generally?

OR: The creation of a film is no ideal participatory practice, as not all participants have the same share of participation in the decision making-process at all levels, and for practical reasons this seems to be kind of a necessity. At least, I could not imagine co-editing or co-directing a film with the 50 or whatever participants in a film... Therefore it is essential that you convince people of the idea of the film, that they trust you, and it is important to take care not to let down this trust. Before I start filming, there is usually a process of communicating with various people; a process that aims to explain what the film/project will be about, what is my/our position in relation to the subject. This has been extremely important in Venezuela, where the society is sharply divided

Oliver Ressler, *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What comes Next?*, film stills, 19 min., 2010





Oliver Ressler & Dario Azzellini, *Comuna Under Construction*, film stills, 94 min., 2010



into supporters and opponents of the so-called Bolivarian Process. For the whole production, it is extremely helpful that Dario Azzellini is based in Venezuela half of the year and developed a good network of people he knows in the communities who supported our filming. These first-hand contacts open a lot of doors, which otherwise would probably stay closed. Having done three films already on the Bolivarian Process, and showcasing them when negotiating with people the filming permissions, has helped a lot to win their confidence and to seal our collaboration.

KK: Let's discuss the processes of production and post-production of these two films. What is the role of weaving document with fiction in constructing the narrative of your films?

OR: Film is never a direct visualisation or repetition of reality, but instead it creates its own reality. Under this precondition, the category of images, whether they are documents or fiction, is not a central thing – at least not from my position of a filmmaker. The majority of the material that I use for films would usually be labelled as a documentary source, but in some films there are also “staged” elements; elements that are more enacted than the interviews in the bazaar in *Socialism Failed...*

For example, in the 8-channel video installation *What Is Democracy?* (2009), in the central piece I decided to script burning of the flags (the flags from the USA, the UK, Australia and so on to Poland) in order to construct a particular visualisation, reflecting on emergent opinion of the majority of the interviewees in the piece. The video describes the temporary form of representative democracies we are living in as the failed form, or at least not “democratic” form, taking the literal meaning of the term.

While I had done already numerous interview-based films over the years, the concept applied in *Comuna Under Construction* of documenting the assemblies in three different locations and developing a narration based on the recorded material in the post-production, was a completely new experience for me. In this case only a few

parameters could have been defined before the shooting began, including the decision for three locations that form three chapters, each focusing on different aspects. The first chapter shows how the assemblies function on the local level, the second chapter points to attempts of setting up a structure among the self-organised communities at a regional level, and the third chapter elaborates primarily upon the tensions between the community councils and the governmental institutions, which are symptomatic in a process of empowerment. I have the impression that through filming of the assemblies you do not influence the content that is being discussed in these assemblies as much as you influence the content of an interview through raising the questions of your interest again and again. For that reason, I have the impression that the film *Comuna Under Construction* has been shaped more through the post-production process – through the numerous decisions about inclusions and exclusions and through highlighting of certain elements – than my interview-based films are.

KK: It seems appropriate to reflect more on the current condition, since we are discussing protest in art and art in protest. There are certainly challenges associated with testing the limitation of the arts in the politics. For instance, the ways of seeing art as an agency aligned with the circumventing of dominant ideologies and obstacles – especially in relation to Euro-centric democracy, if we focus on Europe for example – can be seen as prescriptive. How do you see the process of engaging the public through politically informed art? If we consider 2011 as the ‘year of protest’, do you see such engagement in protest?

OR: Yes, a protest is one option. There is no dominance in my work for representing a specific form of protest. Over the years my work has focused on demonstrations, blockades, protest camps, property damage, militant struggles, forms of social disobedience, go-slows, and more – whatever thoughtful activists in certain contexts felt was a necessary strategy. But it is not inscribed in my work that what I do goes beyond

representation and leads to action; a film hasn't got the potential to lead directly to protest. But a film can assemble arguments and viewpoints that might lead to informing the process of protest and revolutionary ideas; I know from several people that my films on the alter-globalisation movement were central for them in shaping their personal ideas about the forms and potentials of protest today, and inspired them to become more active politically themselves. This happens often because the films are related to specific movements, so people can connect with the local activists where they are based. My films are often presented at the events by the political organisations or at alternative film festivals, including *Document*. Besides this, my work is also frequently presented at art exhibitions, art festivals and biennales, where a variety of people from different backgrounds mix together. So it is also a central function of my work to communicate certain viewpoints or share theoretical considerations about politics and art in interface with the general public, including those that otherwise probably never come across these arguments.

KK: Let's think about the current situation in relation to protest a bit more.... What we now witness internationally is the form of political action such as Occupy Wall Street, a form of protest that is globally scaled. In *Comuna Under Construction* you present a social political experiment, testing the limits of democracy. How can the interface between the arts and politics contribute to building a sense of community, in particularly amongst those who feel marginalised and left behind?

OR: At the moment, in the framework of the Occupy Wall Street movement, activists in several-hundred cities around the world are struggling in order to change the system in a direction that takes care of their social and political needs. This is something the marginalised people in Venezuela have already achieved, at least in a significant proportion. What is happening in Venezuela today is already far beyond the system of democracy, I mean democracy as we have it in the European Community or in the USA. In Venezuela, people refer to their system as a “participatory and protagonist democracy”, and keep persevering to achieve what they refer to as a “socialism of the 21st century”. Our first film made in that context is entitled *Venezuela from Below*, and this title actually explains our approach and an attempt applied to all our films on the political processes in Venezuela, namely to make visible these unprecedented processes of self-organisation and democratic decision-making taking place from the bottom-up. But this challenging process of developing a ‘new’ society unfortunately is overshadowed by the Western media that is focusing solely on de-contextualised statements by president Hugo Chávez, in order to scandalise or ridicule him and to hide what is really going on in the country. I think to learn from these Venezuelan experiences would be very valuable for the emerging Occupy Everywhere movements. And films like *Comuna Under Construction* can surely have a role in that.

KK: The emergence of an international protest movement without a coherent programme or leadership in a sense reflects a deeper problem than the global economic crisis. It is about the failure of democracy based on the rule of law. In your project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* you explore the limits of democracy. Representative democracy functions within distinct borders and among people who are part of the same group or a nation. How can we – situated in global realms – address a “global community” based on democratic principles?

OR: What the current crisis makes so visible – and this is extremely important – is that representative democracy is less about representing people,

Oliver Ressler,
*Alternative
 Economics,
 Alternative
 Societies*,
 billboard
 (installation
 shot: Museum
 on the Seam,
 Jerusalem, 2010)

but more about representing capital. This was already clear to Marx, who described governments as “capital’s executives”, but got tangentially ignored even from many seemingly critical Leftists over the last decades. What is apparent to most people today – that capitalism is in a deep systemic crisis – was already quite obvious to me in 2003 and even before, when I started a thorough research on alternatives to the capitalist system and representative democracy within the framework of my long-term project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*. Among many things that I have learned through this research was that a common way for how a society and economy should be shaped in a more democratic manner does not exist, which is good as it leaves space for people for more progressive struggles in re-shaping societies according to their needs and wishes. Therefore, it is very important that the Occupy Movement does not come up with a coherent programme, as this is something that has to emerge through a process of participation. People active within this movement are spread across many hundred cities around the globe; they work together for example to make a global action day happen (such as the one on October 15th, 2011 for instance), but have very different levels of organisation or other forms of decision-making processes. And this is wonderful; while for some groups consensual decision-making might be the perfect way, for other groups the assemblies based on majority vote might make more sense.

KK: I see the possibility of making a difference in participatory art practice and art as protest. There is however a problem of inclusion and of exclusion. Taking this into account, how do you address the tensions between social and political definitions in different contexts (e.g. liberal democracy, transitional societies of post-Socialist realms)?

OR: I think a participatory art practice or art as protest will differ depending on the context where it takes place. While a specific activity in a liberal democracy might be considered critical, but legal, it might be illegal somewhere else. Having had a solo-exhibition at ACAF in Alexandria, Egypt, a



major problem of my work and potential danger for the art institution appeared to be the inclusion of interviewees from Israel in my video installation *What Is Democracy?* – and not the burning flags of ten nation states, which could potentially be criminalised in countries such as Germany, Austria or France. So what appears critical, problematic or illegal really depends a lot on the context of the presentation. Therefore, ideally, critical art develops in a close reference to specific local contexts, art that really challenges the power in place.

KK: To conclude, can you comment on what a role is for documentation in the process of intervening and in challenging the status quo of a global economy under the reign of capitalist markets, and, more specifically, now in the context of unfolding multiple forms of global protest?

OR: For me a central role of documentation is to ‘make visible’ forms of dissent and resistance, to create a tool that brings the activities and discussions happening in one place to another, so that they can be explored, learned from and

criticised. Ideally, this is a productive process that contributes towards the creation of further dissenting and resisting activities in other contexts and places, so that the isolated activities taking place locally become a movement – a global movement of ideas that becomes broader and gains more and more influence. Probably, it is true that most documentation does not have such an effect – and if it does, it is hard to prove. But I like the inherent potentiality of critical films using documentary formats to help in pushing forward the new, the unexpected and unimaginable; that challenges and confronts the deadness and deadliness of capitalist reality...

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Acknowledgements

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Tales from a River Bank

Bullying, the Arts, and the Production of Museum Space

David Beel

**Bullying in the Arts:
Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power**
Anne-Marie Quigg
(2011) Gower, 266 pgs
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978-1-4094-0483-5 (electronic)

Introduction

There has often been a romanticised view of the nature of labour practices in the arts, culture and heritage – significant segments of the tourism industry. A common assumption is of places of work where committed, talented individuals are able to follow their artistic temperament in a vocational manner. This, from the start, is a highly problematic view of such labour but nonetheless many people are attracted into the industry with a sense that working within it – whether as an artist, curator, or in management or administration – offers, potentially, a better and more enjoyable work/life balance. Therefore Anne-Marie Quigg’s recently published work, *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*, reveals a very different perspective with regard to some of the problems faced by individuals negotiating ‘creative’ work. Quigg informs that those undertaking careers in the arts consistently have to deal with issues around exploitation¹ as well as a variety of abuses of power. Quigg examines the very nature of harassment and bullying in the workplace, taking the reader through different forms of mistreatment and victimisation that can happen, and has happened, in a variety of arts organisations.

The ideas and concepts that Quigg brings to the fore are a timely intervention as, faced with institutional silence, they may help to elucidate a recent internal investigation into bullying and harassment within the curatorial processes of the recently completed Riverside Museum, Glasgow. In turn, this raises a set of serious questions towards the nature of ‘outsourced’ municipal cultural governance in Glasgow. The parent body of Glasgow Museums is Glasgow Life – the brand face of Culture and Sport Glasgow, an external company spun-out from council services which manages culture and sports for the city council.² Workplace accounts point to Glasgow Life creating the conditions by which bullying and harassment took place, and then failing to take any significant action upon those understood to be implicated in an internal report.³

Bullying of all forms

Quigg’s work gives an insightful snapshot into the labour practices of arts organisations, firstly in terms of the ‘creative’ sector as a whole in relation to key trends in employment practices; and secondly, it also represents the way in which a variety of different organisations manage social relations. In doing this, the primary focus of *Bullying in the Arts* is therefore not on ‘artists’ *per se* but on the actual management of the arts in terms of how labour processes are produced. This book therefore helps towards an understanding of unacceptable management practice – such as bullying – but also points towards potential directions for improved ‘leadership’.⁴

Quigg usefully provides an immediate and precise definition of the concept of bullying. At one level bullying seems quite simple, reflecting

what many may have experienced in some measure at school. On another, she exposes a set of practices that are both startling and intrinsically built into many of the work and management practices endured by employees. To begin, Quigg sees intimidatory behaviour as:

“Bullying, mobbing or harassment is a set or series of behaviours, recurring regularly, which results in one person or body consistently intimidating and oppressing another.”⁵

“Bullying is offensive, abusive, malicious, insulting and/or intimidating behaviour that occurs on more than one occasion. The frequency of bullying precludes one off incidents of aggression or violence; the most common type of bully encountered in the arts is the *serial bully* who picks on one employee after another and attempts to destroy them. A serial bully identifies a target and proceeds to systematically bully that person until they are forced to move on, either to another role in an organisation or to another workplace altogether.”⁶

Quigg, having laid out this explicit starting point, then moves to show how such behaviour can develop out of a variety of different circumstances and go unchecked for a variety of different reasons. In doing this, Quigg shows how bullying behaviours are often not just singular actors acting alone, but are often implicit of a wider working culture and due to the very institutions in which people work. Therefore she shows across the ten chapters how such behaviours can develop, from what she terms ‘Founder Syndrome’ to ‘Pair Bullying’, through to ‘Institutional Bullying’ and the issues created by ‘Artistic Temperament’. One of the most engaging but sometimes most difficult parts of this book is the consistent use of vignettes which give first-hand accounts of different incidences of bullying that have arisen in arts organisations. They give insight into the different and varied practices of bullying, showing how different sets of circumstances can produce very different forms of bullying. Beyond this, however, Quigg also provides a much more stark picture of the nature of ‘paid’ work within the arts, highlighting the mechanisms through which a number of broader inequalities are created which are at times related to bullying. These include low rates of pay, long-working hours, expectations of giving unpaid labour and overbearing expectations from managers.

Quigg identifies ‘Institutional Bullying’ as where, often due to structural changes and management abdication, bullying behaviour can be legitimated because there is sufficient disorganisation that illegitimate practices are missed or ignored. Quigg shows how this can lead individuals or small groups using an apparent lack of supervision to begin to systematically bully individuals – ‘serial bullying’. For Quigg, the importance is therefore about producing positive forms of leadership in the arts. To a certain extent Quigg posits work in the cultural and creative industries as being different to other forms of labour but at the same time suggests that this is no excuse for poor or overly aggressive management. Therefore Quigg sets out to debunk a number of ‘myths’ (see box, above right) about what is often considered good management practice with regards to creative endeavour, by suggesting how they potentially lead to management malpractice.

By exploring how these myths fail and destabilise arts practice, Quigg attempts to

The Mythology of Creativity:

Myth 1. Creativity comes from creative types.

Myth 2. Money is a creativity motivator.

Myth 3. Time pressure fuels creativity.

Myth 4. Fear forces breakthroughs

Myth 5. Competition beats collaboration

Myth 6. A streamlined organization is a creative one

(Quigg, 196-198: 2011)

highlight how management practices that have developed in other industries or non-arts organisations should not be adopted for creative practice. Thus, she fully, and problematically, subscribes to yet another myth of creativity: that of it being exceptional to all other labour⁷. She attempts to set out a new blueprint towards good arts management that attempts to embrace the informal, time intensive and sporadic nature of such work and to fight the desire to control, contain, and dominate such practices:

“From the perspective of handling negative workplace behaviours, perhaps our understanding of arts management and administration needs to recognize the importance of valuing positive leadership and best practice in management. Perhaps what we need now are: accomplished and motivated people, without a desire for dominance, with a flair for the arts they manage, and the ability to deal with stimulating and challenging experiences.”⁸



The Riverside Museum

In 2011, Glasgow Life opened its latest remodelled museum, the Riverside Museum. It replaced the Museum of Transport, so as to redisplay the transport collection and house some new acquisitions. The new site occupies a strip of post-industrial land at the confluence of the Rivers Kelvin and Clyde, cut off from the city on its third side by motorway. It is encompassed within the wider ‘stalled’ urban development⁹ of the Glasgow Harbour Master-plan¹⁰ and it sits facing development of the former ship building area of Govan. The museum was built at a cost of around £74 million. Designed by ‘celebrity’ architect Zaha Hadid, it follows a now familiar urban development model centred on ‘iconic’ landmarks. As such, it is a further attempt to make

a bold statement through its choice of architect and architecture: the museum's homogenous zinc-cladding portraying a wave-like form set facing the river Clyde¹¹ is intended to add 'impact' to the 'river frontage', thereby stimulating property investment/development scenarios.

It has been primarily funded through a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund and Glasgow City Council. It is hoped that through the building of the Riverside Museum, Glasgow Museums can repeat the success – measured in terms of visitation rate – of the Kelvingrove Museum redevelopment. The Riverside Museum is an attempt to (re)build a second 'flagship' museum in the city, one which is to contribute significantly to the re-imaging of Glasgow in the process. Thus, Glasgow Museums arrived at the situation in which it was to re-display its many transport objects. In doing so, many parallels with Quigg's concerns developed in the production of the museum's internal spaces and displays, as the Project Management Team (PMT) for the project and curators sought to produce a new museum.

Neo-liberalism – Disciplining Practitioners

Examining how curatorial practitioners have attempted to implement the city's museological concepts of 'access and inclusivity' in the production of the Riverside Museum is of significance to us all. Glasgow's 'municipal' museums are primarily publically funded cultural institutions and they represent a focal point at which a variety of competing discourses come together. Thus, the wider purpose of this research project¹² has been to understand the implicit geographies in such entanglements, as practitioners attempt to produce museum spaces.

The apparent lack of influence that the wider entrepreneurial city agenda has had on the way the collection was curated – accordingly, the 'developers' have their iconic building, the museum content being largely already in existence, its transfer a matter of course – elides the city's already integrated museological strategy. Similar to the city's schematic pursuit of a further iconic building, Glasgow's 'new epistemology of museums' is itself, according to one observer, a medley of received technocratic ideas.¹³ However, the Director of Policy, Research & Development at Culture & Sport Glasgow (then Head of Museums & Galleries), posits as theory of museum praxis:



"integrating access at a strategic level across organisational structures and activities".¹⁴ The perceived popular success of this approach with the Kelvingrove Museum stands as a marker of achievement to be replicated across the city.

My research indicates the extent to which pressures to deliver large-scale projects such as the Riverside Museum on time and on budget are serving to legitimate and as catalyst for management practices that fall outside Quigg's promotion of best practice and leadership. With this it becomes obvious that the entrepreneurial city does not only govern the landmark architecture but also a supposedly 'technical' transferral of existing museum stock and practice. The urban development agenda is having an

influence upon museum practice, as failure to produce the museum on time would affect the image of the city – as well as impacting other cost issues for a cash-strapped organisation – and can be understood to have led to certain behaviours that should be considered unacceptable. This reflected a wider structure of governmentality coming down to bear on practitioners in the production of the Riverside Museum. The local state's desire to maintain its competitive position through enhancing the city's image meant that those managing production of the museum space produced a specific 'conduct of conduct' – a commonly understood frame of reference for which types of management practice are deemed acceptable.

The curators' position and role was not only altered as a result of the inclusion agenda, changes in the governance structures through which curators operate have also resulted in changes in their status. Starting from the refurbishment of the Kelvingrove Museum and continued in the Riverside Project, there has been a progressive 'deskilling'¹⁵ of the curatorial role. For some curatorial staff this has meant little control over the content to be contained within the museum, as the Project Management Team has sought to make almost all of the key decisions, essentially reducing curators to the function of researchers¹⁶. To a certain extent, when producing a museum on the size and scale of the Riverside, organisational structures are likely to operate in authoritarian ways in order to complete the project on schedule. However, within the management of the Riverside Project this often went beyond what some curators found acceptable. To them the process has borne "an absolutely miserable time" (Peter, 2009)¹⁷ due to an over-bureaucratisation in the museum process, coupled with a strong desire of some of the PMT to control and micro-manage curators, as well as other members of the PMT. Thus, when disagreements arose, dissenting voices were quickly silenced:

"I think it's quite widely known that there were a lot of staffing issues. A huge number of people left in the course of the Riverside project which is fairly unusual actually – the rate that people were going." (Liz, 2009)

This became such a problem that in 2009 there was an internal investigation commissioned by Glasgow Life into the conduct of the Management Team, where accusations of 'bullying' were made. However, due to the perceived sensitive nature of this report, it has not been published and no disciplinary action was taken. Only one copy of the report is believed to exist, held by the current Head of Service.¹⁸

Variant undertook a Freedom of Information request in order to locate this report, seeing transparency in delivery of our public services as being in the public interest and integral to holding local 'democratic' power to account, but this has initially been declined.

On 24/10/11, *Variant* requested:

- All documents relating to and reporting of management behaviour with specific reference to 'bullying' within the Riverside Museum Project.
- The publication of the internal report conducted by [the Information Services Manager, Glasgow Libraries] into alleged allegations of management malpractice during the production of the Riverside Museum.

On 18/11/11, Culture and Sport Glasgow, Director of Corporate and Community Planning Services, responded:

"I can confirm Culture and Sport Glasgow holds all of the information that you are requesting. ...However... it would appear that of the information requested is covered by an exemption or exemptions ... Glasgow Life believes... that releasing the information is likely to 'prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs'. Furthermore that disclosure would, or would be likely to, inhibit substantially (i) the free and frank provision of advice and (ii) the free and frank exchange of views

for the purposes of deliberation or (c) would otherwise prejudice substantially, the effective conduct of public affairs."

Also on 18/11/11, a Glasgow Life staff E-newsletter announced a New Freedom of Information Process will involve all responses going via its Media Team prior to dispatching.

For these reasons the following can only give a snapshot of some of the issues created in the production of the Riverside Museum, but it is hoped that if the report is made public at a later date, a more thorough depiction to what was a very difficult time for members of staff can be given. Below is a 'second-hand' summary to some of the report's findings and a brief glimpse into the reactions and feelings of staff after this enquiry. What is astonishing about this is that fifteen witnesses (in the enquiry alone) confirmed that such malpractice had taken place.

"I have now left Glasgow Museums but I understand that the investigation is on-going. The results of the first phase, which ended last December, concluded that three people had bullied and harassed, and managed 'negatively' (the investigation looked into



bullying and harassment and 'negative management'). A senior curator got away with it - his only fault was eccentricity (this has been greeted by much derision). It was decided not to go through the disciplinary process because staff already felt too intimidated and this could worsen things. There were 18 witnesses – only 3 spoke in support of those accused. There was also another 12 or so witnesses who had left Glasgow Museums who wanted to speak to [the Information Services Manager conducting the investigation] about how badly they had been treated. They were not asked because it was said they had had their opportunity when they left." (Peter, email correspondence, 2010)

How did this come to take place and why did such behaviour become apparent within management practices? It is important to understand that it is not my intention to accuse or blame individuals for what has happened. Rather, I wish to consider what structural factors legitimised these practices, how this created a specific geography of power¹⁹, in that the production of the Riverside Museum existed with a very specific set of geo-power relations in Glasgow, especially with regards to the city's perceived 'competitive' position. From the beginning, this project represented a top-down initiative driven by Glasgow City Council. This in turn had a direct effect upon the micro-practices that played out within the museum service. In doing so, it reflects upon many of the ideas that Quigg highlights as implicit in the definition of *institutional bullying*, where the structural set-up of the Riverside PMT and the outsourcing of the project led to a culture of work where there was sufficient management abdication from Glasgow Museums and Glasgow Life that allowed the Riverside PMT to act in ways which are unacceptable.

Abuses of Power in the Production of Museum Space

In attempting to research the role of curators in the Riverside Museum it became very obvious that this would be a difficult process, with access to many curators not being granted. While this is often not unusual for research projects that have to negotiate access to participants through senior staff, it also may point towards the sense

of pressure and need for control to be held by the PMT during this live project. Further to this, various curators who had worked with the Riverside Project in Glasgow Museums also refused to meet for an interview for fear of professional recrimination if anything to the detriment of the project was stated.²⁰ Again, this highlights something about the working relationships developed by the PMT. Through negating these setbacks, conversations with management staff and other curatorial staff (who were willing to speak) within Glasgow Museums shed light on the discourses and processes that have been used and the conflicts that have arisen in the production of the Riverside Museum to date.

In understanding why such an over-bearing sense of control was established in the workplace, one that has seen a loss of ownership in work for curators, a demoralisation of staff and created a high turnover of people working on the project, it is essential to look at the context in which the project was created. Due to the structure put in place at the start of the Riverside Project, where curators from outside were brought in, whilst existing Glasgow Museums curators continued to work on the Kelvingrove, the project experienced a change of curatorial responsibilities, with existing curatorial staff from Glasgow Museums only transferring into the Project at a later stage. As one senior research curator describes:

“In a way it has been allowed to become a stand alone project because the focus was so much on Kelvingrove and the Riverside was left to get on and do its own thing and then suddenly once Kelvingrove is opened we are trying to now engage with Riverside and there is a bit of resistance like ‘Who are you?, What you are you doing?, This is our project’, and a kind of a bit of a failure to appreciate that actually it’s not your project, it’s a Glasgow Museums project so there is a bit of friction there.” (John, 2008)

When the Kelvingrove was completed and the wider Glasgow Museums organisation was able to shift its attention to Riverside, as John states, this created ‘friction’ and some people considered their desire to have input unwelcomed. Riverside PMT’s sense of ownership and urgency was reflected in the need to keep to schedules and not allow changes after decisions had been ‘signed off’:

“So in a kind of really practical level my role is partly co-ordination of content and making sure that the curators stick to the programme, which in a live project is critical, because if we go off programme, we would get in to the whole realm of fees and fines. Making sure the content is all in a really sort of manageable format.” (Sarah, 2009)

And:

“Depending on the stage that you are at and, you know, one goes from the early stages where you are very inclusive and are welcoming of all ideas and of the input from panels communities and so on...then having to be able to hone those ideas down and I suppose that the challenges come in terms of people understanding the process and the programme so, then, one can’t always have the same inclusiveness once decisions have been taken in order to hold on to financial budget.” (Andrew, 2009)

For Sarah and Andrew, time, financial restraint and the pressure to produce a quality cultural institution for Glasgow legitimated the need for a systematic, strict and bureaucratic set of procedures for turning curatorial ideas into content. This meant keeping to specific cut-off dates in terms of what needed to be completed by when and how research should be written up:

“We were also quite clear to curators, we set up a sort of formal process for deciding stories so they knew that they would submit these documents, there was a time, a programme, and they would submit them by a certain date. The core content team would review them.” (Sarah, 2009)

This also led to a strong and rigid vision within the core Management Team of what the museum should contain and who it should be aimed at, one which attested to integrate the views of various panels (a ‘community’ panel, an ‘access’ panel, an ‘academic’ panel, a ‘teen’ panel and a ‘junior’ panel). Within this working structure and the legitimacy it constructs, there is then a reduction of the role of the curator in terms of what they can do and how they can go about doing it. Workplace sociologist Harry Braverman²¹

cites this as the splitting of work into a selection of ‘limited operations’. Hence, due to the control of the Core Content Team and the Management Team, the curators had little ability to influence the processes of what would be considered acceptable research or what would be considered the best stories to follow. As Sarah (2009) states, curators were always “one step removed from the decision making process in terms of feeding in to the project management team” in terms of deciding what was to be used. To a certain extent this worked acceptably when the team was still detached from the rest of Glasgow Museums, but when further curatorial voices, who had previously worked on Kelvingrove²², wanted to become involved and offered different opinions to those expressed by the PMT, this created real difficulty. Two different cultures of working across the service had developed:

“I mean there is an element of crossover in terms of staff being involved in both projects but the Riverside was started when [the redevelopment of] Kelvingrove was in full swing and it was created as a different way of running a project because it was very much a brought in project team with a lot of short term contract staff and they have a very different approach to what they want out of the project...I think that there is a different philosophy and there has been a bit of a kind of disjunction between the Riverside project and the whole of Glasgow Museums.” (John, 2008)

The curator above talks about a difference in philosophies when talking about the two projects, and to a certain extent this difference in working practice and procedure meant a lot of curators felt dispossessed from many of the objects they had previously researched and worked with over the years. Liz, a former curator, reflects this when discussing how the core content team selected curators to take on specific projects:

“They seemed to be arbitrarily allocated to people. So the stories and the objects that you really have invested time in and were really passionate about: you didn’t necessarily get to pursue. They were handed out to somebody else and there didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason. So people, naturally, the venue curators, naturally took quite a bit of offence at that, it was seen that all the exciting stories were kind of farmed out to people that were on temporary contracts and people that were trying to keep up with keeping the venue running, doing Kelvingrove and doing Riverside, just sort of got the dregs.” (Liz, 2009)

This then became highly demoralising for a lot of curators as they had little control over what they would be doing. Further to this, many curators felt pressured to present work in a way that specifically fitted with what the Management Team wanted, or face, they feared, disciplining, censure or exclusion from the project. Peter, who at the time of interview was still a curator at Glasgow Museums, was one member of Glasgow Museums staff who consistently found himself in such a position:

“They set up a core content team which was to oversee the development of the content and I was told by the director that that was my job to chair the meeting. It was picked up by the project’s senior curator who felt that her role was to chair that meeting. There was a group of five managers and they just gave way – an absolutely miserable time. If I wanted to carry on in chairing the meeting, if I wanted any kind of assistance, if I came along with, expressed, a particular point of view, it was automatically the opposite viewpoint taken. And it was very obvious that I was being deliberately excluded from meetings, particularly where I had a viewpoint that opposed theirs.” (Peter, 2009)

Peter highlights how his ability to have agency within the project was prevented due to him disagreeing with the Management Team and, in further discussion with Peter, he was not the only one to be treated in this way as the project progressed. As the interview continued, he talked about how other curators had suffered similar experiences

as the Management Team wished to retain as much control as possible. Rigidly sticking to deadlines and targets is symptomatic of the effects of neo-liberal discourses upon management attitudes, affecting how curators can go about their work. Richard Sennett – who has “explored how individuals and groups make social and cultural sense of material fact; about the cities in which they live and the labour they do”²³ – argues this in terms of what is meant by ‘good work’:

“What do we mean by good-quality work? One answer is how something should be done, the other is getting it to work. This is a difference between correctness and functionality.”²⁴

Sennett highlights a tension in the practice of the ‘craftsmen’ which is then reflected in the management of the Riverside Project, where there is a split between correctness and functionality. For the managers in the museum put into a position where there is a specific set of pressures and conditions around them, this means they took a more functional approach to implementing the new museum, one which seemed to guarantee the most likely possibility for the successful completion of the museum, on time and on budget. Added to this there was a sense that senior managers on the project and in Glasgow Museums



and Glasgow Life failed to see the consequences of the behaviour that was being used to produce the museum:

“It was very obvious that I was being deliberately excluded from meetings, particularly where I had a viewpoint that opposed theirs. It became like guerrilla warfare that they were waging over a period of about three years and they were backed up by the project leader. And their behaviour, the pattern that they established, it became apparent to me that it was also applied to other people. There was a point where I went to see the project leader. This was about a particular problem with very aggressive emails; emails that I was getting and very targeted from a senior curator who was junior to me; and he just sat there and said it’s six of one and half-a-dozen of the other, then he said that he was going to start monitoring my emails, which I thought equally offensive.” (Peter, 2009)



Peter shows, like Quigg suggests, that often bullying is perpetuated through a failure of management to deal with the problem and that they often in part blame the victim of the bullying. Peter’s account shows this to have taken place. Despite raising the complaint, there is a failure in the organisational structure to deal with this at the point of initial complaint. In the long run, this meant Peter felt isolated, victimised and unfairly treated, causing him, like others, to find employment elsewhere, whilst those who perpetrated the behaviour remained in post.

Conclusions

The possibility of failing to produce a museum that does not fit with the building’s iconic image, that does not help promote the image of Glasgow, that is not *seen* to benefit the people of Glasgow, in terms of museum experience and local authority spending, meant that it becomes very difficult for management not to become over-controlling in how it implemented the production of a new museum. Hence, following Sennett’s lead, the delivery of the project becomes the key aim (the functional) which leads to the detriment of the work practices of the people who have the role of producing the museum (the correctness). With such pressure placed upon individuals in the production of the museum, and with Glasgow Life failing to offer a sufficiently strong sense of ‘good’ arts governance²⁵, the Riverside Project failed to ensure a sound working relationship for the staff involved, resulting in a number of management failures to adequately support curatorial staff. This produced the opposite to what Quigg calls positive leadership, as the PMT took a negative management approach to the work curators did.

Interestingly, despite the internal inquiry finding against some of the members of the PMT due to the way they operated on the project, little was done due to the desire to complete the museum. As a result of this, the head of the PMT (accused of bullying but found to not be directly culpable) was recently nominated for an award for ‘Outstanding Leadership’ for “his management of the highly successful Riverside Project” in the *Glasgow Life Staff Recognition Awards 2011*.²⁶ This despite, at the very least, missing blatant examples of malpractice in his own Management Team. However, he was awarded the ‘Chief Executive’s Award for Outstanding Achievement’ stating: “As project director over the last ten years, [the project manager] has been at the helm and his leadership and direction helped to ensure the £74 million museum was both delivered on time and in budget.”²⁷



Notes

1 E.g. concerning the use of unpaid interns in creative industries organisations, see Carrot Workers Collective: <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/>

2 See: ‘Glasgow Life or Death’, Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt; *Variant*, issue 41: <http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/rgn41.html>

3 This part of the paper is based upon research gained in the recent completion of a PhD thesis: Beel, D.E. (2011) ‘Reinterpreting the Museum: Social Inclusion, Citizenship and the Urban Regeneration of Glasgow’. University of Glasgow: Unpublished PhD Thesis.

4 Itself not an unproblematic or ‘value free’ concept, see, e.g., ‘Artist as Executive, Executive as Artist’, Kirsten Forkert; *Variant*, issue 35: <http://www.variant.org.uk/35texts/CultLeader.html>

5 Quigg, A.M. (2011) *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*. Surrey: Gower. p.xv

6 *ibid.* p.1

7 For a critique of this see, e.g. ‘Make Whichever You Find Work’, Antony Iles & Marina Vishmidt, *Variant*, issue 41: <http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/ilesvishmidt41.html>

8 Quigg, A.M. (2011) *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*. Surrey: Gower. p.177

9 <http://www.clydewaterfront.com/projects/greater-govan--glasgow-harbour/retail/d386--glasgow-harbour-tesco>

10 http://www.clydeport.co.uk/index.php?site_id=3&page_id=623
http://www.clydeport.co.uk/index.php?site_id=3&page_id=626

11 See e.g. <http://www.architectural-review.com/home/innovators/riverside-museum-by-zaha-hadid-architects-glasgow-uk/8616624.article>

12 Beel, D.E. (2011) ‘Reinterpreting the Museum: Social Inclusion, Citizenship and the Urban Regeneration of Glasgow’. University of Glasgow: Unpublished PhD Thesis.

13 See, ‘Blairism on the walls at Kelvingrove’, Stephen Dawber; *Variant*, issue 27:

<http://www.variant.org.uk/27texts/kelvingrove27.html>

14 <http://www.coracle.eu.com/artist/203/event/whose-culture-it-social-inclusion-and-cultural-diversity-irelands-cultural-spaces>

15 Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press; and Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

16 This observation deserves further attention in particular as we are witnessing the continuing rise of curators and curatorial practices – may we even have to ask more persistently: Who are the curators, and what is their relationship to senior management?

17 All names have been anonymised. From: Beel, D.E. (2011) ‘Reinterpreting the Museum: Social Inclusion, Citizenship and the Urban Regeneration of Glasgow’. University of Glasgow: Unpublished PhD Thesis.

18 This was only disclosed to me due to a curator who took part in the enquiry informing me of its production; the report is not open to public access.

19 Allen, J. (2003) *Lost Geographies of Power*. Wiley-Blackwell

20 This individual was offered full anonymity but was still uneasy about speaking so I did not pursue it any further.

21 Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press. p70.

22 This is an important consideration because an argument could be made that some curators may be against the use of narrative displays but, having successfully worked on Kelvingrove, they were very much versed in this technique of displaying.

23 See: <http://www.richardsennett.com>

24 Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p45

25 Quigg, A.M. (2011) *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*. Surrey: Gower.

26 *Cont@ct* (2011) Newsletter for Glasgow Life - October. Glasgow: Glasgow Life

27 *ibid.*

Disposable Women, *Not Natasha*, and the Economics and Politics of Sex Trafficking

Roberta McGrath

“To be honest I give more importance to taking the story out into the world once it is finished. That plays again an important part in the photographic process.”

Dana Popa

“Media alone cannot transform public policy, but it can influence change, create social awareness and make more accessible the language of public policy.”

Forum on Migration and Communication

Sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is the poorest country in what is called, without a hint of irony, the new Europe. In 2006, Dana Popa (who was then a post-graduate student on the MA Photojournalism and Documentary programme at The London College of Communication) travelled to Moldova and began a project to tell the stories of young girls sex trafficked across Europe.¹ Popa was then commissioned by the London-based human rights and photography organisation *Autograph ABP* to develop the work. She returned. The result is the exhibition, and small book, *Not Natasha*. Natasha, as Popa tells us at the very start, is the generic name given by punters to prostitutes with East European looks. It is a name that instantly strips these women of their sense of self, identity and individuality. The women hate it. Their testimonies are recorded here and the stories they tell are of betrayal, captivity and abuse. These are women who have not simply been exploited, deceived or seduced, but systematically violated, degraded and repeatedly raped.

When Popa has talked about the work, she often begins gently with a shot taken from the window of her mother’s flat in a middle-class area of a prosperous town in Romania. This is a shot taken from within but the prospect without is bleak: it is twilight; the camera pans along a dreary block of flats on the other side of a long, straight road. Popa begins her story: At the end of the road as the daylight dims, women are brought and here, and just beyond the middle-class apartments, sex is bought; bodies are sold. Her point is clear. At the end of many streets – just around a corner, just beyond where we care to look the same story is repeated. We choose, she says, not to look; not to see; and consequently not to think of who is there. We learn not to speak about it; we choose to disavow our knowledge. Popa however does not. She is driven to look further; to think about what lies beyond the end of the street, to trace the lives of those women, in that place, there, who are bought and sold. It is a story that goes well beyond what we either care to see or what we want to know. It takes her on a bleak journey across Europe to the edge of Asia: From London to Moldova, across the Black Sea to Istanbul and back again.

Survival, Missing Women and Working in Soho

Sex trafficking is commonly seen as a sub-set of, and secondary to, the wider problem of human trafficking; a general exploitation rather than specific sexual abuse, torture and rape. Popa shows us that it is not. Sex trafficking lies at the intersection of two problems. On the one hand, a problem of economic migration and the trafficking of people: of men, women, children who are desperate to escape lives of poverty and persecution. On the other hand, it

is a specific problem of gender: it is primarily women who are sex trafficked. As Mark Sealy states, remarkably: “It was not until 1993 that the General Assembly of the United Nations finally adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women”. Article One reads: “For the purposes of this Declaration, the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.² Add to this the fact that in Moldova a third of the workforce lives and works abroad, and, in 2006, 80% of households remained unable to generate a subsistence income of \$48 a month.³ Female unemployment, as Popa tells us, may well be as high as 68%. The consequence is that those who are most vulnerable, young women, often no more than children, are most at risk. It is estimated that in Moldova since 1989 (with full ‘independence’ granted in 1991) somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 women have been sold into prostitution elsewhere. This could be as high as 10% of the female population.⁴ These staggering numbers make Moldova the main exporter of ‘sex slaves’ for the European continent. Increasingly, Moldova has also become a major destination for sex tourism. This exacerbates the problem by creating internal sex trafficking.

Writers such as Siddharth Kara remind us that this is the direct result of general “powerful macroeconomic forces unleashed during the process of economic globalization in the post-Cold War era.” These economic forces “have been more responsible than any other force for the unforgivable rise in contemporary slavery.” But sex slavery is particular. As he points out, “even though only 4% of all slaves are sex slaves worldwide, [they] generate almost 40% of the total profits.”⁵

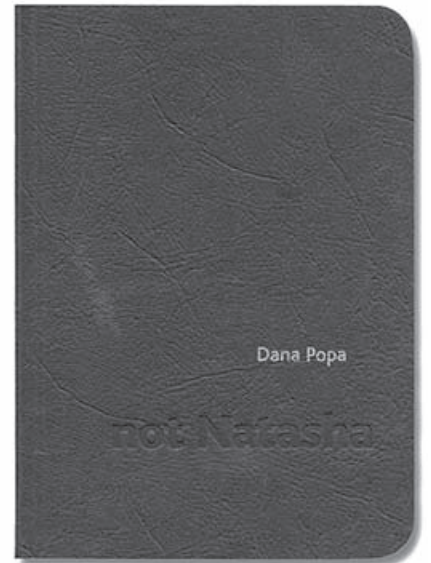
This is a harsh reality for women in struggling, fledgling capitalist economies who are routinely forced by the economic equivalent of a scorched earth policy to leave ‘home’ either to support their families who are less mobile, and less employable, because they are too old (or too young), or employable but only at rates that are far below what it now costs to live, or to seek better futures elsewhere as families fall apart and there is no one to support them. As Zimmerman suggests, it is the congruence of “[e]xtreme poverty, a severe reduction in economic earning capacity and multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage and abuse” that are the “risk factors that make some women and girls increasingly vulnerable in their countries of origin to being recruited and coerced into the sex industry”.⁶ But it is also true that some of these women are neither recruited nor coerced. They are simply sold into sexual slavery. As one woman testifies: “My Husband-to-be sold me for \$2,200.”

Sex trafficking is then an international, illicit, highly profitable activity. Kara points out that “unlike narcotics which must be harvested, refined and packaged, the female (or we might add, male) body requires no such processing and can be repeatedly consumed.”⁷ However, it is indeed the bodies of women and children – and most commonly of all, therefore, very young women that are at the sharpest end and most women who enter

prostitution do so first as minors and, “approximately 80 per cent of transnational victims of trafficking and forced labour are women and girls, up to 50 per cent of which are minors”.⁸ There is a picture here of two sisters holding hands. They have open, pretty faces and look no more than 13. They are simply disposable.

It is this world of extreme exploitation that Popa sets out not so much to expose, but more to unearth, to bear witness, and give vision and voice to what is overlooked or simply unheard. These are extraordinary photographs that, despite their narratives of brutality, are gentle. This is deliberate. There is no sensational or sentimental ‘retinal excitement’ offered here; she simply opens up a space for the viewer. We are tucked in between her images, the photographs, and the stories the girls and women have recounted to her, and we begin to contemplate. Tucking-in features a lot in Popa’s images: neatly folded corners, a carefully made-up makeshift bed with its thin, washed out counterpane carefully smoothed by the stroke of a hand; cushions neatly stacked, throws folded, a remnant of lace artfully draped, a sleeping baby swaddled in a net curtain. This attention to care, to detail makes reading the short testimonies painfully uncomfortable. There is no soft padding here; the words are stark; they are assaults. In Popa’s work it is the prose that is raw. These are not captions. Rather, in place of the usual fare of photojournalism a strange stillness fills the photographs. It is as if we are for a moment suspended. This, coupled with a high degree of detail and richness of colour, reverses the usual relationship between form and content in the documentary image. We notice the texture of a piece of thin yellowing paper or the nap of velour fabric. Melancholy and loss are woven between cheerfully coloured fabrics and worn faces; a lone handbag, perfectly arranged sits on a pillow at the top of a bed no longer slept in; in another image we see the possibility of a future, of lives to come as two girls lie on the grass holding hands; smoking they look up and into the sky above. Here, in London, Popa tells us that the girls come to Regent’s Park on a Sunday to watch weddings. Popa is good on metaphor. She uses gentle persuasion to make us look long and to think hard about the economics and sexual politics of trafficking. There is little room for abstraction in her work. Her lens is clear and sharp; her eye deft. We can tell from the angle of the images that she is small in height; she often compensates for this by bringing us close in.

In other images, however, trauma is written on the body: the impossibly sad look of a mother who has lost her daughter and who sits solid and silent, defiant before the camera, holding between finger and thumb a tiny puppet-like image; a child-like, crudely cut out and poor copy of a photograph glued onto a piece of card. This tiny figure is no more than a few centimetres tall. But it is all that she now has left of the daughter, a token



in place of the girl she once held in her hands. These older interiors are made of wood. They are poor interiors, simple and dark, rich in colour, full of floral fabric in vivid turquoise blues and cochineal pink and blood reds. They seem to be full of nature. The world outside that encroaches is much nastier and more dangerous. It is a dumping ground of discarded objects. The clinics where women receive treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and psychological disorder appear pale and wan; the floral fabrics washed out. We see the cut arm of a girl. Her body covered with a sheet; only a listless forearm hangs out. There are images here of the children born from unwanted sexual liaisons; two boys, twins, one stands wearing a crudely made paper mask, the other lies on a bundle of blankets on the floor. Hine meets Arbus. In another image, a woman's face is covered by her hand; an ill-fitting wig is awkwardly propped above her head. Popa knows the 'art' of Arbus and Serrano; Sherman and Woodman, but it is a very different politics that animates these images.

Like the Israeli writer Ariella Azoulay, Popa asks us to consider how, despite an ever growing discourse of human rights, two groups in particular – women and non-citizens – are increasingly abandoned not simply in social, legal and political discourse, but equally, and perhaps increasingly importantly, in the very media that ostensibly represents them. In her book *The Civil Contract in Photography*, Azoulay employs the legal concept of 'contract' (as a binding obligation) in order to move us beyond liberal terms such as empathy, pity or compassion that have organised so much empty rhetoric on 'the gaze'. For Azoulay, and Popa, it is the political sphere of photography that might be reconstructed through the concept of civil contract. Parity of participation (which is one general meaning of justice) is at the heart of their arguments. Azoulay puts it like this:

"[P]hotographed persons are participant *citizens*, just the same as I am".⁹ (my emphasis) And we, the spectators, are too. Azoulay and Popa challenge us, urge us to move beyond being participant *observers* and to become members of an active, politically engaged community, to join, in Azoulay's words, a global 'citizenry of photography' that extends far beyond the borders of the sovereign nation-state. For Popa, "taking the story out into the world once it is finished [plays] an important part in the photographic process."¹⁰

In Dublin the exhibition became a focal point for a unique collaborative project between The Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland's (ICI) campaign *Turn Off the Red Light*. The ICI is pressing for legislative change to make purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence.¹¹ (A similar campaign was launched in Glasgow at the end of 2009.¹²) The ICI recognises that sex trafficking takes place both within countries and across borders and indeed it is the "demand for a continuous supply of women to be available for commercial sexual exploitation in destination countries provides a highly profitable market for international traffickers."¹³ The State's current response "is complicit with the interests of the trafficker and strengthens the position of the trafficker in relation to the woman who is trafficked. This helps to keep trafficking a

hidden and clandestine problem".¹⁴ Legislation in Ireland has mainly focused on removing prostitution from the streets, but this represents a particular problem for migrant women who constitute 90% of all women involved in indoor prostitution.¹⁵

In cases of sex trafficking, these women are primarily perceived as illegal immigrants first, and prostitutes second. It is difficult to prove that they have been trafficked, and not simply 'willingly' become sex workers. Most commonly they are deported and so end up being returned to their country of origin.¹⁶ As Popa tells us, the traffickers are often waiting to collect what they perceive as 'goods', rightfully returned to their owners to simply be re-trafficked. Popa's lens becomes darker here: when she photographs from below deck on a boat in the Bosphorus, the window is smeary, the sea a filthy grey. And in another shot taken in a lurid hallway in Soho, harsh neon light illuminates a chipped yellow metal chair against set against a dirty puce-coloured wall. These images are in stark contrast to Popa's use of photography as a means towards restorative justice. Here she harnesses the other side of photography's power: to lay bare, to expose, to explicate. The showing of the work in Dublin harnessed the work to public policy. Here it became part of a far wider programme of education and activism involving *Taoiseach*, Senators, City Councillors (including the Mayor of Dublin), Trades' Union Activists, and Health Professionals.

We might prefer not to listen, not to hear these stories, nor to look at these photographs; it is more comfortable to turn a blind eye or deaf ear. Popa's images, however, are utterly compelling. She challenges us to think beyond what is contained within the photograph's frame and shows us how the local and ordinary lives are linked to a global supply that is driven by high 'consumer demand' well beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Prostitution is not a career choice. As one participant at the closing event reminded the audience, no child has ever uttered the words: 'Daddy, when I grow up I want to be a prostitute'.

Not Natasha was exhibited in a *Pop-up Gallery* in Creation Arcade, Duke St., Dublin, 7 July - 5 August 2011.

www.danapopa.com
www.fomacs.org
www.immigrantcouncil.ie
www.autograph-abp.co.uk

Notes

- 1 I have included this to remind students that they should think big. Many excellent projects can begin at this stage.
- 2 Mark Sealy, 'Beyond the Lens', *Foam*, Spring, 2009.
- 3 Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Sex Slavery*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 115.
- 4 Dana Popa, *The Telegraph Magazine*, 22 November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/8139722/The-women-sold-into-sex-slavery.html>. (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 5 Interview Siddharth Kara, Columbia University Press, <http://cup.columbia.edu/static/siddharth-kara-interview> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 6 Cathy Zimmerman *et al*, *Stolen Smiles: The Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe*, (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2006)

- quoted in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 11. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 7 Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Sex Slavery*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)
 - 8 Cited in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 11. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
 - 9 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract in Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 17.
 - 10 Dana Popa, *The Telegraph Magazine*, 22 November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/8139722/The-women-sold-into-sex-slavery.html> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
 - 11 Since 1999 the Swedish Government introduced a law that made purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence, punishable by a six month fine or imprisonment.
 - 12 <http://www.endprostitutionnow.org>
 - 13 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 1. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
 - 14 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 10. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
 - 15 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 67. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
 - 16 The ICI is campaigning to:
*Ensure immediate access to independent legal representation for all migrant and trafficked women in the sex industry at the point of contact
*Make a renewable reflection and recovery period available to all trafficked women, including migrant women exploited in prostitution who have been identified as suspected victims of trafficking through an inter-agency approach
*Establish a programme, with clear protocols and administrative criteria, through which residence permits would be granted on 'humanitarian grounds' (when required) to all victims of crimes committed against them in the context of prostitution or trafficking
*Residence permits should also be granted to women who have exited prostitution and cannot return to their countries of origin for reasons relating to their safety, age, state of health, family situation and other factors relating to their humanitarian or medical needs
Cited in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 14. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).

Anarchism & Sexuality

Tracey McLennan, Gordon Asher in exchange with Jamie Heckert

Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power

Edited by Jamie Heckert, Richard Cleminson
(2011) Routledge, 238pgs
ISBN: 978-0-415-59989-4 (hardback)
978-0-203-82844-1 (electronic)

Jamie Heckert is a founding member of the Anarchist Studies Network and the editor of two collections of perspectives on anarchism and sexuality – a special issue of *Sexualities* (2010) and *Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power* (2011) co-edited with Richard Cleminson.

Anarchism & Sexuality is described by the co-editors as “a set of serious, sustained engagements with the complex relationships between anarchism and the politics and practice of sexuality ... a collection of passionate, provocative papers that incite the reader to recognize the relevance of anarchist ideas to queer and feminist sexual politics.”

Heckert and Cleminson further clarify their intentions as: “first, to make fresh anarchist perspectives available to contemporary debates around sexuality; second, to make a queer and feminist intervention within the most recent waves of anarchist scholarship; and, third, to make a queerly anarchist contribution to social justice literature, policy and practice” (p1).

Anarchism & Sexuality consists of a collection of works, many of which have origins in a 2006 conference and workshop convened on the same theme, which are intermixed with four “poetic interludes” and an interview with Judith Butler – whose book *Gender Trouble* (1990) fundamentally challenged the way we conceptualise gender – relating her work to dialogues around anarchism.

We would like to thank Jamie for this opportunity for exchange and for the speed and generosity with which he responded to our questions – themselves the result of divergent exchanges following engagement with this collection of works and discussions around the issues they raise.

Tracey McLennan/ Gordon Asher: One of the aims of both the ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’ conference and the book, is that they were intended to provide a space for academics and activists to be together and to learn from each other.

This aim is picked up by Gavin Brown in his contribution ‘Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’ where he discusses his concerns about how his presentation would be received by the more “‘activist’ elements of the audience” (p201).

Throughout the book, is “activist” used to convey ‘experience-based writings’, perhaps not formalised as Participatory Action Research, or more infrastructure-based action, which includes activist organisations, regular workshops and conferences, publications and social gatherings?

Do you feel that there is a clear distinction between activists and academics, specifically with regard to the complex relationships between anarchism and the politics and practices of sexuality?

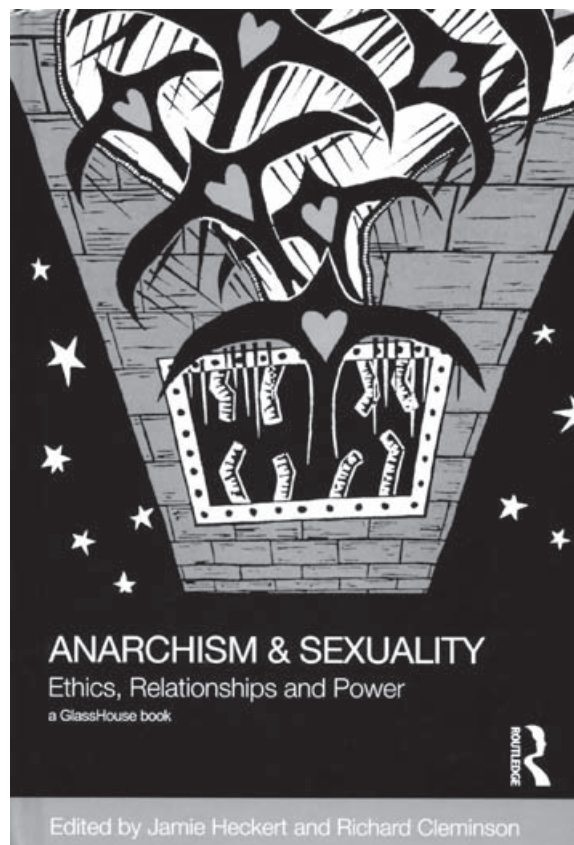
If so, how do you interpret what is meant across the book by “activists” in terms of engagement outwith academia?

As one of the editors, alongside Richard Cleminson, how do you perceive the book to approach any such division?

How does academic exploration/ criticality – in the form of ‘queer theory’, anarchist studies – connect with contemporary sexual activism, politics and practices aiming at the realisation of sexual equality and justice?

Jamie Heckert: Thank you for starting off with such key questions! I’ve long been interested in these different identities: activist and academic. And they do fit together interestingly with queer theory

which likes to shake up questions like “are you one of these or one of those?” So no, I don’t feel there is a clear distinction between activists and academics. These labels are not truths of selves anymore than ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’. Each of us has complex thoughts and feelings, desires and behaviours. We all have effects on the world around us, of which we are a part. So, I suspect when Gavin was writing about his concern, he was aware of the normativity that goes with these identities. Just as societies of control function, in part, by getting us to worry about whether we are ‘real men’ or ‘real women’, with a clear line in between, the same can go for academic and activist. Obviously, right, if you are a real activist, you can’t be an academic and vice versa. Or so they say. Sometimes.



When we are attached to either identity, or both, we might look to others for reassurance that we are contributing to our communities. And of course, that feedback can be invaluable. However, not being attached to either identity can lead to a more relaxed and selfless form of service. Not worry about being either a ‘good activist’ or ‘proper academic’ (or trying to do both at once) frees up a lot of energy to simply contribute to the wellbeing of others. And what we need for wellbeing may not be what we think. Contributions can be surprising, strange, queer – neither good in a straightforward way nor proper, expanding our understanding of what both scholarship and other forms of organising and creating can involve. Working with the contributions to this book have certainly done that for me, and I am deeply grateful.

At the same time, labels and identities have some use, as long as we don’t take them too seriously. And so sometimes in this book, activist is used to refer to people involved in social movements who don’t necessarily spend a lot of time engaging with the kind of political theory you find in university library books. Oh, activists read, of course! I was just at the Anarchist Bookfair in London with it’s thousands of participants and many more thousands of books and, magazines and zines. But apart from those of us who are also involved in academia, they don’t tend to write articles for peer reviewed journals. So the word

‘activist’ is used in the book in various ways to recognise those differences. And when some of us get into a university in one way or another and open the doors, it can be amazing to share that space with people who have diverse ways of engaging with social change, different ways of writing and speaking, and to listen to and learn from each other.

This book is very much a product of those queer, liminal spaces. It’s not *either* an academic book or an activist book. It’s both/and, and, and, and! The writing comes from, and contributes to, thoughtful activism and engaged scholarship. It’s less about categories and more about connections. In the book, queer theory and anarchist studies, interwoven with ethnographic, biographic and literary storytelling, work to nurture a sense of imagination, to see not only what might be possible, sexually and socially, but also what already is. Too often, politics is focused on the future, and what is missing in the present. Perhaps awakening to the beauty and vitality of life, even with what we call the state and capitalism around, is even more radical. This book does that in many ways: bringing attention to the potential playfulness of power (Lewis Call), the revolutionary nature of love (Laurence Davis), the diverse ecology of contemporary queer autonomous spaces (Gavin Brown, Marta Kolářová & Kristina Weaver), the erotic nature of nature (Helen Moore) and the wealth of historical and theoretical inspirations available to us (Jenny Alexander, Judith Butler, Lena Eckert, Judy Greenway & Stevphen Shukaitis). Even the very painful and/or angry autobiographical pieces (Fergus Evans, Jamie Heckert & Tom Leonard) have their beauty.

TM/GA: Among the aims of the conference that gave rise to the book were “to bring the rich and diverse traditions of anarchist thought and practice into contact with contemporary questions about the politics and lived experience of sexuality.” Both in style and in content, the book is conceived as aiming to question, subvert and overflow authoritarian divisions. Given these points, can we ask you about the choice of fiction in Laurence Davis’s contribution ‘Love and Revolution in Le Guin’s *Four Ways to Forgiveness*’, and Lewis Call’s ‘Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany’.

Do you have any thoughts on whether more contemporary fiction may have made the book more involving for non-academics? For example, questions of imbalance of (male) power, sexuality and ethics are explored in much contemporary popular vampire fiction – with (predominantly female) humans occupying what is often an uncomfortably physically weaker and seduced/ submissive/ subsumed position. As Caitlin Brown writes: “The power dynamic of male vamp/ female human is in fact uniquely set up for the possibilities of subversion and exploration of the nature of power in any male/female relationship. It is a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and the varied responses to this power imbalance available open to women.”¹

Contemporary vampire fiction has also covered subjects such as alternative approaches to sex and relationships. The fourth series of *True Blood* makes an attempt at covering the subject of *polyamory* – consensual, responsible non-monogamy – both between the vampires themselves and in a relationship between a human woman and her male vampire boyfriends.²

To what extent do you feel that the book, both in style and content, achieves its aims

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to “question, subvert and overflow authoritarian divisions... between seemingly mutually exclusive activism and scholarship; between forms of expression such as poetry and prose”?

How do the contributions begin to address the situatedness of academia and the limitations on academic publishing (beyond the recognised limitations of its current hardback format)?

JH: You know, Jesse Cohn, the anarchist literary theorist, and I half talked about writing something together about the race, class, gender and sexual politics of *True Blood*. But I must admit, I lost interest early in the second series. It seemed to me to lose some of its emotional and political subtlety and rely more on the shock factor of gore and violence. So I’ve not caught up on the whole polyamorous plot. But I am curious. Maybe I’ll give it another go.

Clearly there is value in a popular cultural pedagogy that engages with material that people are already reading or watching and I’d be delighted to see folk developing that in relation to anarchism and sexuality. Would that have attracted more non-academics to the book? I don’t know. I do know that Lewis Call and Laurence Davis have written beautifully engaging essays inviting readers to engage with literature they may not already know. Of course, Ursula Le Guin is pretty famous (and contemporary as far as I’m concerned!), especially for her anarchist classic *The Dispossessed* and her genderqueer feminist one, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. These examples of political science fiction are only the tip of the iceberg of the tremendous body of work she has produced a lifetime. Davis brings to our attention one of her lesser-known works linking it with a contemporary questions around love, violence and radical social and personal transformations. I had already *Four Ways to Forgiveness* as I am a devoted Le Guin fan. I even wrote her a public love letter. But I when I read it again after reading Laurence’s essay, I saw so much more than I had before.

While Laurence presented an earlier version of his essay at the Leeds conference that gave birth to this book, Richard and I contacted Lewis to rework a paper he’d written earlier to fit into the collection. We loved it for a number of reasons. Like Le Guin’s story suite, the novels addressed focus very much on questions of racialised slavery and the politics of unlearning hierarchies. Revolution, in a word. While Le Guin emphasises the gentle, tender aspects of love, Call brings out the kinky side in novels by Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany. So the essays complement each other beautifully.

Now, I don’t want to do make some sort of high culture versus popular culture hierarchy, but it does seem to me that the writing of Le Guin and Butler (I’ve not read Delany yet) has an emotional subtlety and complexity not likely to be found on television. Neither of them are academic. They’re smart, to be sure, but not academic. Rarely does either television or academic writing touch me, move me, in the way that these women do. Of course,

everyone is different. What touches one person can leave another cold. It’s like that thing Foucault said, “What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.”³ There are things in life that are easy to enjoy – and sexy, scary vampires can push those buttons for sure. And there’s nothing wrong with that, at all. It’s just that sometimes the more challenging pleasures that must be cultivated with effort are ultimately more nourishing, more sustaining. The things that come with ease might be easy because they reinforce our sense of who we are and how the world is. Learning to let go of those ideas and opening our hearts and minds to the beautiful complexities, and ultimate simplicity, of life can be much harder. Stories can help us do that. They can be guides. As Le Guin once wrote, “All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don’t, our lives get made up for us by other people.”⁴ I’m sure *True Blood* is doing that, too. Which is great! I’ll just be interested to see whether these essays bring more attention to these wonderful writers. (As an aside, Lewis has also written a remarkable essay using *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to explain Lacan and anarchism.⁵)

I’ll leave the question about achieving aims up to the readers. The book doesn’t do that on its own. As Le Guin once said, “when it’s published you’re sending it out into this void, hopeful it’s full of readers. And the way they read it is what makes it a story. They finish it. If it’s not read, it doesn’t really exist. It’s wood pulp with black marks on it. The reader does work with the writer.”⁶

As for academia, well. Does it have a situatedness? Sure, we might say it has histories and associations with privilege. We might say it has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. The book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered. Street theory, movement knowledge, personal insight – each of these are acknowledged and honoured in this book, even when they might be interwoven with high theory. For another, a number of us talk about our experiences in academia, the patterns of relating we experience, our desires to open up different spaces, to relate differently. The book is also an invitation to scholars, a word which means both teacher and student, to find their own ways to do scholarship, to find their own voices. And, most importantly, to learn to do that cooperatively, compassionately. Because academic institutions and academic publishers are, on one level, competing for prestige and profit. And for this macro-political economy of academia to function, it requires an everyday level of compliance, competition and emotional disconnection. The book isn’t just to theorise the relationship between love and revolution. It’s here to help us practice it, to experience it.

TM/GA: There is discussion in the book about hierarchies of relationships – covering why we struggle to talk about ‘intimacy’ and the way certain types of relationship are seen as being of more worth than others. The word ‘relationship’ here meaning any individual or group who feel close to each other rather than necessarily something romantic or sexual. This issue is picked up in both Jenny Alexander’s ‘Alexander Berkman: Sexual Dissidence in the First Wave Anarchist Movement and Its Subsequent Narratives’, and Lena Eckert’s ‘Postanarchism and the Contrasexual Practices of the Cyborg in Dildotopia or The War on the Phallus’.

Would it have been possible to have more discussion of how sexual vs non-sexual intimate

relationships are ‘normatively’ perceived/ located in the context of sexual rights and justice – hierarchies in law, sexual commerce/ work?

(This relates to what the International Network for Sexual Ethics and Politics describes as: “ascriptions of both positive and negative values to sexual practices that have impacts on those who do them and on societies in which they are done – what is pathologised, prejudiced against and discriminated against and what is held up as healthy, virtuous and legitimate – the vagaries and ills of contemporary moral values, legal rules and political and cultural discourse on sexuality”.⁷)

JH: Of course! The book asks more questions than it answers and there is certainly space for a lot more thinking about anarchism and sexuality, or anarchism and intimacy more broadly. For me, anarchism as opposed to statism, hierarchy or domination means learning to listen with care to ourselves and each other rather than blindly follow the authority of norms or laws. This doesn’t mean blindly refusing authority, either. Each of us has something to share from what we’ve learned in our lives. Some will have learned deeply and have the skill to express that in the way that helps others live their lives well. We might call that good authority. Good authority is characterised not by the desire to control or the belief that one knows the right way for others to live, but by love.

TM/GA: In Jenny Alexander’s ‘Alexander Berkman: Sexual Dissidence in the First Wave Anarchist Movement and Its Subsequent Narratives’, a question is raised as to why should “emotionally significant deep attachments where those concerned choose not to share bodily fluids be deemed less socially significant than fluid-bonded states”? (p39) If intimacy rather than sex is important, and attachments that don’t include sex between non-blood relatives are of equal importance, how then might attachments between humans and non-humans be seen?

(Particularly around how power might be used in an ethical way when the balance of power is so much in favour of the human side of the connection.)

JH: Wonderful question! For most of our evolution as a species, attachment to the nonhuman world has been incredibly important. It takes a lot of effort to create mass confusion that exists placing humans outside of nature. We, too, are animals. So, yes, let us honour relationships with particular non-humans, whether companion animals or trees, and with the non-human world more broadly. Gavin writes about this a bit in his chapter when he talks about Queer Pagan Camp and the relationships there with land and spirit. The developing field of ecopsychology⁸ has a lot to offer here, too, in making space for those of us not raised indigenous to acknowledge and nurture our intimate relationship with fields and forests, oceans and skies, gardens and parks. So, too, the intersections of anarchist, feminist and indigenous politics.⁹

The second part of your question intrigues me. I admit I immediately and contrarily think about the way in which climate change highlights that humans aren’t quite so powerful as we like to imagine. We cannot control the nonhuman world, because we are only a small part of it. Sure, we’re influential, but we’re not in charge. Where is the balance of power here?

I’ll also let Bakunin answer this. “[Human beings suffer from] a nostalgia for which there is no remedy upon earth except as is to be found in the enlightenment of the spirit – some ability to have a perceptive rather than an exploitative relationship with his [sic] fellow creatures.”¹⁰

TM/GA: Could you comment, particularly with regard to the balance of power, on intimate or significant and deep relationships between human- and non-human animals? Further, is the claim that by treating animals badly we build up habits that will lead to us treating humans badly relevant?

JH: Relationships are relationships. Nurturing a capacity for sensitivity in any relationship will affect others. And vice versa. So yes, I certainly agree that treating non-human animals badly is intertwined with treating human animals badly. Is there a one-way causal link? I’m not so sure about that.

With regard to the first question, I’m not



sure what the balance of power means. Does that relate to a notion of power as something you either have or don't have, like an object that can be weighed? I experience power as something you do, or perhaps on an even more subtle level, something that moves through us. So I'm not very interested in trying to measure power relationships but to nurture a capacity for sensitivity, for perceptiveness. What would it mean to acknowledge that non-human animals also have emotions and desires, and to honour those by listening?

For many, a perceptiveness and a sensitivity to the emotions of non-human animals is entirely incompatible with eating them. Emotionally and spiritually, that is my own way in life. It is not everyone's way, nor would I want to impose it.

I've noticed, in myself and others, that trying to have a certain diet for political reasons can be less about loving other beings and more about judging oneself as not good enough in one way or another. The diet becomes yet another method of control. I'm also inspired by a politics of becoming-indigenous, connecting with the land individually and through the processes of nurturing cultures that are internally and deeply intertwined with place. For most indigenous peoples, eating meat with respect for the spirit of the animal and with a profound awareness of the interdependence of life, is an integral part of the culture.¹¹ For the UK, Simon Fairlie¹² has made some pretty compelling arguments for eating small amounts of locally raised meat as part of an ecologically sustainable diet.

While I keep a vegetarian diet myself, I do wonder about food and climate change. Where does my vegetable fat and protein come from at the moment? How much energy is used to get them to my plate? How much could we produce locally? What could we swap for olive oil traded by sailing ships? When we look at things like nut production, such as Martin Crawford's¹³ sweet chestnut trials in Devon, the question of how to relate with the squirrels who are generally much quicker at picking the nuts immediately comes up. When I was growing up in Iowa, we ate grey squirrels. Martin also kills and eats them both to sustain himself and in order to get accurate measurements of the productivity of the chestnut trees so that those of us who prefer to eat the nuts can benefit from the results. And I know I certainly prefer the respectful hunting of wild squirrels to the industrial production of meat.

Eating, of course, is not the only intimacy. We all share our lives with non-human animals, even if we don't intentionally have any in our homes. They live all around us and have evolved with us. We cannot escape this intimacy, but we can cherish it.

TM/GA: The book mentions labels in a number of contexts.

Jenny Alexander relates to how their use can lead to lack of discussion in some situations when discussing Alexander Berkman. She makes the point that Berkman is well known as an early 20th century political figure and an anarchist, who served 14 years in prison for the attempted assassination of businessman Henry Clay Frick as an 'act of propaganda of the deed'. However, his writings on sexuality have been "largely unmarked in his re-circulations in anarchist and scholarship-of-anarchism contexts from the 1960s to now." (p32) Jenny Alexander suggests that this lack of attention may be because the intimate relationships he described having in prison "do not fit the categories by which we in the twenty-

first century are generally given to understand passion, sexual desire and intimacy." (p32) Berkman describes his encounters with two other male inmates as passionate but that there was not any physical relationship between Berkman and either of the other men.

In 'Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator' you discuss your own concerns about how labels can be applied for positive reasons – identifying as an outsider can bring the benefit of support from other outsiders and provide a way of dealing with spending time in what might otherwise be a hostile environment. However, an effect of this can also be that those same labels may "inhibit transformations of consciousness or social relations" (p160) – labels limiting and constraining how people think and act.

Gavin Brown – 'Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces' – writes of his worries about being labeled overly intellectual by the activist members of the 2006 conference audience. He also says, "...and worried how the more 'activist' elements of the audience might react to my attempt to uncover impulses toward autonomy in a range of spaces beyond activist circuits." (p201)

Sexual identity is a personal, public and social construct. Labels pathologise, prejudice and discriminate against... and labels are adopted, adjusted, and reconfigured in the social imaginary. Sexual practices have impacts on those who participate in them and on the societies in which they are done.

Why does the conference/ book seek to specifically focus on anarchism in terms of its relation to sexuality, when most notions of sexualities apparently sit productively within neo-liberalism?¹⁴ In what (anarchistic) political way can lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual perspectives, queer perspectives and approaches, be said to be distinctive?

JH: For starters, the relationship between a diversity of sexualities and neo-liberalism isn't so clear cut. Yeah, there are many ways in which the impulse toward LGBTQ liberation has been diverted by the attractions of privilege and profit. That's understandable when we are seduced by the confusion of individualism. And it kind of works for some people. We suggest anarchism is a rich tradition of resources that can help everyone have the kind of freedom and well-being that capitalism promises that can never deliver, not even to the so-called 1%.

While the labels of LGBT have been taken up by hierarchical institutions, the impulse for liberation has been left behind. Emma Goldman spoke to this many years ago:

"Individuality is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of Individualism; much less with that 'rugged individualism' which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his [sic] individuality. So-called Individualism is the social and economic laissez faire: the exploitation of the masses by the classes by means of legal trickery, spiritual debasement and systematic indoctrination of the servile spirit, which process is known as 'education'. That corrupt and perverse 'individualism' is the strait-jacket of individuality. It has converted life into a degrading race for externals, for possession, for social prestige and supremacy."¹⁵

If someone believes that externals are what

makes for a good life, they may well throw themselves in with neo-liberalism. Anarchism potentially offers something deeper.

(I say potentially because interpretations of anarchism sometimes gets caught up in that great distraction of resentment.) Anarchism emphasises freedom *and* equality, individuality *and* community. Nathan Jun has summarised this as vitality, which certainly describes the life of Emma Goldman. And while Sheila Rowbotham is correct to say that we can't all be Emma Goldman, we can each be vital, vibrant, full of life in our own ways. And we can help each other to do this.

But not when we let labels get in the way. Folk like Jasbir Puar, Jin Haritaworn, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler and others have pointed out how the label Muslim is linked with the labels terrorist and homophobe, creating racial divisions within potential LGBTQ communities and reinforcing those global patterns of relationships who might call Empire. So, neo-liberalism isn't working for Muslim LGBTQ folk. And when being gay is about wearing certain labels, it becomes a class issue. I'll never forget performance artist The Divine David saying, "I can't afford to be gay."

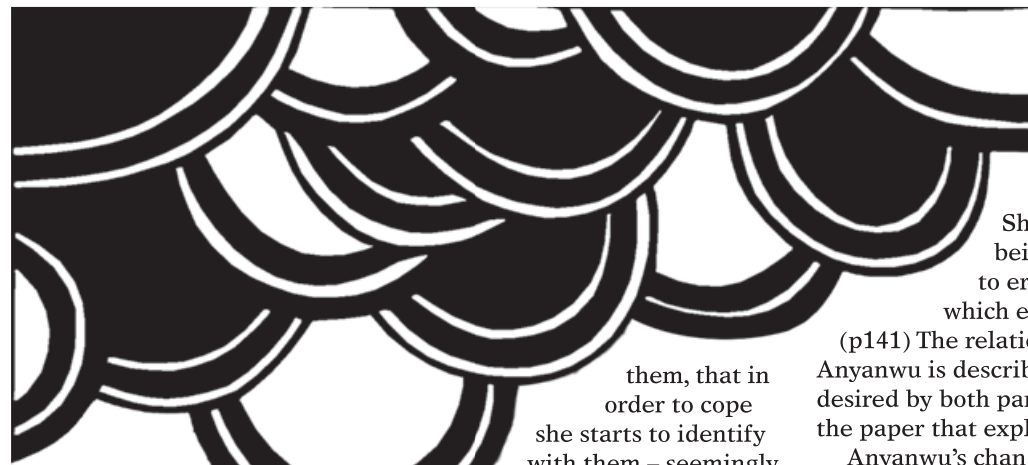
So while some LGBT identities may reinforce state and capital, others are creating queer alternatives. Still others may be queering that supposedly clear border between the state and anarchy or autonomy (like Gavin does in his chapter).

Is there something distinctive about LGBTQ contributions to anarchic politics? Probably yes, but not necessarily. Ben Shepard, for example, highlights the role of playfulness in queer anarchist politics¹⁶. And while you don't have to think of yourself as queer to be playful, there is something outside the normative about adults playing in streets or on the picketline. Like Emma Goldman, we want dancing in our revolutions. And like Ursula Le Guin, we want loving in our revolutions. Queer approaches to anarchism also include playing with gender, sexuality and intimacy. They may also involve a seriousness around painful experiences of gender/sexual/racial violence.

Anarchism, like any ism, has the potential to become rigid, dogmatic. To keep it vital, we can each bring our own experiences, our own truth, our own individuality. The labels might fall away.

TM/GA: Laurence Davis's 'Love and Revolution in Le Guin's *Four Ways to Forgiveness*', describes a slave character within Le Guin's work. The character is shunned by her own people and sexually abused by her captors. Over time, she starts to identify strongly with these masters. She has no agency to avoid spending so much time in their company and so being intimate with





them, that in order to cope she starts to identify with them – seemingly to redress the power imbalance, to access the power accorded to the male protagonists. (p117) Later in the

books, her circumstances change again and she becomes a writer and speaker, campaigning for freedom for the oppressed. (p118)

Throughout ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’ there was an affirmation of how difficult it is for individuals and groups to change how they act and respond with regard to ethical thinking and feeling about an equality of relations as a personal endeavour.

A plurality of oppressions resonate through institutional and state forms. How is the impact of living and working conditions and experiences, the impact the social environment has on people, considered in the book through anarchist thought?

Does an emphasis on the critical ethics of the self outline a limit to an anarchist political articulation of the “critical understandings of the role of law, politics and culture in the prohibition, permission or regulation of sexualities, both in its oppressive deployment and possibly liberating possibilities in contemporary societies”¹⁷?

JH: To start with the last question there, the self is a great place to start. Start where you’re at, say the buddhists. That doesn’t necessarily mean we stop there, that we can’t also talk about law, politics and culture. Of course we can! But let’s not skip over the immediate.

And so, Laurence and Lewis focus on the effects of slavery on people and how they unlearn that with love and/or kinky sex. I wrote about emotional slavery, domestic violence and fantasise of success and how I’m learning to unlearn those through spiritual practice. Jenny wrote about the role of hypersexuality in both capitalism and certain queer anarchist spaces, inviting us to look to Alexander Berkman for inspiration to recognise other loving forms in our lives. Gavin wrote about how self-organisation can create spaces for people to practice relating differently, to let go of the effects of oppression and to learn new skills.

Throughout the book, subjectivity, our sense of our selves as individuals, is acknowledged as a collaborative production. The book is also full of anarchist ideas, inspirations and practices for collaboratively producing ourselves differently. Not because there is something wrong with us as we are, but because we might find joy in finding a bit more spaciousness, integrity, freedom and equality in our lives.

TM/GA: In ‘Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany’, Lewis Call points out that Foucault has suggested that it is impossible to eliminate power – asking that we “entertain the hypothesis that it is, after all, possible to exercise power in an ethically responsible way”? (p136)

He goes on to describe a relationship between two characters from Octavia Butler’s Patternist series. The relationship starts with Doro forcing another character, Anyanwu, to submit to him. She does so in order to avoid being killed. Over time “she learns to eroticise the power relations which exist between her and Doro”.

(p141) The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu is described as an ethical relationship desired by both parties. However, there is little in the paper that explains how this can be so.

Anyanwu’s change in viewpoint could be seen as the psychological fallout from having to repeatedly submit to the will of another in order to remain alive. In this extreme imbalance of power, Anyanwu appears incapable of sustaining any individuality. Her own opposing wishes and agency is completely overtaken by the control which Doro exerts over them; a control of all of her actions and restriction of her choices.

Could you say more about this “exploration of the nature of power in any male/ female relationship” as “a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and the varied responses to this power imbalance available open to women”?¹⁸

JH: Have you read *Wild Seed*? It’s incredible! And I think Lewis is spot on in his reading of what appears to be a paradox. How could Anyanwu love someone who could kill her? I’m not sure the story is about a power imbalance between women and men as that would suggest power is an object that some people have and others do not. And that reading is understandable. Doro can kill at will. Nothing can stop that. Except, perhaps, love. Lewis suggests a poststructuralist reading of power, not as a noun but a verb. It’s not something you have, it’s something you do. And there are different ways to do it. Doro’s practice of power is state power – power over life. And he is a beautifully tragic character, unable to find love because he desires control. Anyanwu is a shape-changer who learns she does not have to be afraid. She practices power from below. Yin, rather than yang¹⁹. And in doing so, disarms Doro. What an anarchist!

TM/GA: ‘Anarchism and Polyamory’²⁰ – a collection of writings on the theory and practice of open relationships from an anarchist perspective – sees anarchism as a political practice that challenges mainstream economic, social and political power relationships, and polyamory as a similar challenge to the mainstream view of romantic relationships. In ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’, polyamory is discussed by Marta Kolářová in her contribution ‘Sexuality issues in the Czech anarchist movement’. Both works raise a question regarding pressure to conform to social norms from within anarchist movements.

Kolářová describes how polyamory is frowned upon amongst Czech anarchist movements: “Anarchists practising polyamory have been criticised by others. This form of social control in the movement has pushed multiple relationships to dissolve and shamed individuals into returning to monogamy.” (p188)

Social pressures around conforming to polyamory in UK anarchist movements are described in ‘Anarchism & Polyamory’ in Sour Mango Powder’s contribution ‘Let them eat cake: Anarchist polymory theory and reality’²¹, where the author describes pressure put on women

to engage in sexual relationships with what he describes as “in-group dominant males.” (p27) Discussion of the pressure to conform is continued in ‘The rise of polyamory: leftist men’s self-serving cure all for sexism’ where the author “Lost Clown” describes her break away from being a practising polyamorist because the power imbalance existing between men and women in anarchist movements in the 1960s meant that for women polyamory resulted in them not being “seen as human, but as sexual chattel.” (p44)

Given these explications of different potential tensions between anarchism and polyamory, could you comment on whether you are aware of such issues existing in UK anarchist groups? – and if so, how they have been, or could be, addressed?

JH: I helped organise a session called ‘Love, Sex & Anarchy’ at the Anarchist Bookfair in London last year. Three of us gave short talks on different aspects of the theme – including sexual violence, the meaning of queer, and polyamory – to introduce the session²². Nearly all of the questions that followed focused on the latter. How do you cope with jealousy? How do you manage time? Why does it seem so hard to love? So yeah, clearly a monogamy and polyamory are key issues for folk in anarchist networks here in the UK.

My concern is when polyamory becomes normative in anarchist circles. As if having multiple romantic, loving and/or sexual relationships is a way to establish one’s anarchist identity or credentials. ‘Hey, look at me, I’m liberated.’ This is the flipside to that 1960s (and ongoing) feminist critique you highlighted, where so-called sexual liberation becomes sexual harassment. ‘Hey, baby, what’s the matter? I thought you were liberated.’

Now, Laura Stacer-Portwood, writing about the US anarchist movement has argued that sexual anarchonormativity can be ‘wielded strategically’: “There is power in identity. ... Where the disciplinary power of anarchonormativity is used to promote a queer critique of hegemonic sexuality, and thus makes life more livable for those whose desires are repressed by dominant institutions and discourses, it has positive political potential. Where such power is used to generate new forms of repression or to foreclose relationships of solidarity or to distract from efforts to combat material oppressions, it is less strategically sound.”²³

She and I are in disagreement here. I’m not convinced that a new normativity, a new conformity, is necessary to displace old ones. My personal preference is generally to focus on common ground in a way that allows appreciation for difference without it becoming either the truth of the self or the other. Monogamous or polyamorous, gay, bi or straight, or living across or outwith these categories, we all experience challenges in our intimate relationships. Things push our buttons. We get excited, or scared. We love.

I see the question of how to undermine, subvert or overflow heteronormativity as intertwined with the same questions about capitalism. In a recent critical engagement with the book *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, Gabriel Kuhn comments on the narrow, and controversial, definition of anarchism given by the authors. Rather than suggesting there is one true path to dismantling capitalism, an anarchonormativity which can be wielded strategically, Gabriel argues, “the answer cannot be to only organize with anarchists we have no

disagreements with. The challenge for anarchist organizing rather seems to develop forms of organizing that turn diversity from a destructive threat to a productive tool. This is tremendously difficult, but I think it is the only chance we have.”²⁴

So for me, an anarchist politics promotes neither monogamy nor polyamory, but provides spaces and practices for us to notice how we might get caught up in our own fears or desires leading us to pressure others. Anarchism, ultimately, is the faith that we can all get along with each other without anyone having to be in control. This requires a great capacity for sensitivity, empathy and communication regardless of whether or how we might label our relationships. These are capacities we can nurture in ourselves and each other.

TM/GA: Christian Klesse in ‘Notions Of Love In Polyamory - Elements In A Discourse On Multiple Loving’²⁵ writes: “Survey data collected on USA polyamory communities affirms the educated nature and advanced class-position and ethnically/ racially exclusive nature of polyamory communities, an image which is reproduced in most publications on polyamory.”

Could you say something about the subjectiveness of inequalities at work in different relationship practices – for instance, how socio-economic disparities impact the power dynamics of any possible relationship?

Do anarchist critiques of class relations, for instance, help us to address such power dynamics, as regards anarchist emphases on communication, respectful negotiation and decision making, integrity, reciprocity and equality?

JH: I’m sure there are many ways to answer these questions, and other more class-centred anarchists might offer a different approach, but for me, in this moment, the most immediate response is the ways in which the class system depends upon and encourages the delusions of scarcity, superiority and inferiority. Capitalism is based, in part, on a belief that there isn’t enough to go around, so the only way to be okay in life is to compete and hoard. As critics have pointed out, it is the systems of distribution and ownership we call capitalism that itself creates this apparent scarcity. However, knowing this intellectually isn’t the same as knowing it emotionally. And so many of us learn, in all levels of the class system, that love is something you should earn or deserve by being good enough, that it’s something you fight for and, once won, must defend against challengers. Now, it might well be easier for those who trust that the world will look after them, without needing to fight or struggle, to be openhearted. Class or racial privilege might be one source of this trust. And oppression can shut people down emotionally, as they learn to believe themselves inferior and not worth listening to, trusting or believing. They/we learn not to listen to ourselves.

I suspect there is also something about mobility and meeting people who support letting go of norms that don’t work for you. I’m sure I would have had very different experiences of love and intimacy if education hadn’t helped me find a way out of the small village of my youth. Finding people who listen to you, who believe in you can make it easier to believe in ourselves.

Gordon, I once heard you refer to class struggle as the “struggle against class”. I like that, though I would offer a different version: letting go of the belief in class. I don’t mean ignore the way in which differential access to resources affects bodies and minds differently. I do mean learning to relate to each other as equals despite the collective delusion that some people are better than others.

TM/GA: A clear theme in the book is how hard it is for those engaged in fighting for social change

to change themselves. In the preface of the book, Judy Greenway is quoted saying that: “It is easier to theorise and to talk about what we would like to be than to talk about what we are” (Greenway 1975:6).

There is an echo of this sentiment in ‘On Anarchism: An Interview with Judith Butler’ when Butler describes the State as “a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour, we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” (p95)

In ‘Nobody Knows What an Insurgent Body Can Do: Questions for Affective Resistance’, Stephen Shukaitis explores the issue of how women engaged in childcare tend to be excluded from left activist groups. This point is continued in ‘Love and Revolution in Le Guin’s *Four Ways to Forgiveness*’ when Laurence Davis discusses the Spanish Civil War, saying that “most anarchist revolutionaries in Spain continued to regard personal life and domestic arrangements as entirely private matters. They did not question the authority of males within the family, and assumed as a matter of course that women would take responsibility for domestic chores.” (p105) And the not surprising result was that after the changed environment of the revolution, amidst the onset of the Franco regime, “many pre-existing oppressive societal values governing sexuality (and women’s sexuality in particular) were allowed to continue intact.” (p106)

In ‘Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator’, you give an honest, mindful account of your own struggles describing how, in spite of distrusting – with good reason – the drawing of lines between the good guys and the bad guys, you still find yourself doing it. (p160) And again when you talk about how “asking for help is one of the aspects of anarchy I find most difficult to practise. For mutual aid to be truly mutual is to acknowledge vulnerability. Dammit, that’s just not how I was raised! And to ask, rather than demand, is to accept that the answer might be ‘no’. Hearing and reading feminist criticisms of macho behaviour in anarchist spaces, I know I’m not the only one facing these challenges.” (p173) You also talk about attending non-violent communication courses and deliberately taking care over who you interacted with during the stressful period of writing up your PhD.

In ‘Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’, Gavin Brown discusses how autonomy is always in a process of being built since there is always a tension between autonomy and our dependence on hierarchy. (p202)

Kristina N. Weaver hints at the need for ongoing work in ‘On the Phenomenology of Fishbowls’ when she comments that she had expected the 2006 conference that gave rise to the book would be “at best the chance to slot a few more nodes into my network of activist and academic contacts; at worst an encounter with the kinds of social policing so common in queer spaces.” (p224)

If we, collectively, have an idea about how relationships can be more ethical, about how fluid sexuality can be/ should be, then pointing out the gap between theory and where we are now is a useful, if essential, transitional step. However, while societal constructs/ constellations are always undergoing change, outwith focusing on this difficulty, how might positive societal change at the level of inter-personal relationships be proactively enacted starting from where we are now?

JH: Practice. Gently.

I think Foucault, for example, was on to something writing about counter-practices and practices of freedom. Each of us can find practices that help us to live our lives well, to see that life is beautiful, even when it’s painful. We can share our insights freely without expecting others to take up the same practices. The first axiom of queer

theory is “People are different from each other.”²⁶ Let’s honour that and be gentle with ourselves and each other.

For me, I’ve learned so much about freedom from non-violent communication, permaculture, yoga and meditation. This could be dismissed as ‘mere lifestyleism’ when clearly what we need is organisation. My question about that is, what enables organisation to work and what makes it fall apart? So many anarchist groups and other efforts at creating alternative systems fall apart because people have trouble working together. That’s okay. It’s not easy. It’s very easy to get attached to the idea of being right, to decide in advance how things should be or which ideas are better than others. It can be challenging to let go of that, to notice that beliefs and ideas can be helpful but don’t need to be given too much attention, to listen to something deeper, subtler. Listening to the body and mind, to the land and to others are at the root of anarchism (and sexuality), for me. Everything else follows from that.

Notes

- 1 http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/09/feminism_and_th
- 2 <http://www.tantricnews.com/trueblood-goes-poly.html>
- 3 Foucault, Michel (1989) ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, in S. Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84*, New York: Semiotext(e), p310.
- 4 Le Guin, U. K. (2004) ‘The Operating Instructions’, in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*, Boston, MA: Shambhala, p208.
- 5 Call, Lewis (2011) ‘Buffy the Post-Anarchist Vampire Slayer’ in D. Rousselle and S. Evren (eds.), *Post-Anarchism: A Reader*. London: Pluto, pp 183-194.
- 6 Freedman, Carl (2008). *Conversations with Ursula K Le Guin*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp: 88-89.
- 7 <http://www.insep.ugent.be/insep/>
- 8 See, e.g., <http://ecopsychology-journal.eu/>
- 9 <http://http://journals.sfu.ca/affinities/index.php/affinities/issue/view/8/showToc>
- 10 Quoted in Tifft, L and D. Sullivan (1980). *The Struggle to Be Human: Crime, Criminology, and Anarchism*. Sanday: Cienfuegos Press, p2.
- 11 See, e.g., Alfred, Taiaiake (2005). *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press
- 12 Fairlie, S. (2010) *Meat - A Benign Extravagance*
- 13 <http://www.agroforestry.co.uk/trustinf.html>
- 14 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/11/gay-club-scene>
- 15 http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/ANARCHIST_ARCHIVES/goldman/goldmanindiv.html
- 16 Shepard, B. (2010). ‘Bridging the divide between queer theory sage and anarchism.’ *Sexualities* 13(4): 511
- 17 <http://www.insep.ugent.be/insep/>
- 18 http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/09/feminism_and_th
- 19 Lao Tzu (1997) *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (trans. U. K. Le Guin with J. P. Seaton), Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- 20 <http://www.radicalbooks.co.uk/product/dysophia-1-april-2010-anarchy-polyamory>
- 21 Can also be read here: http://dysophia.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/polyamory1-6_web.pdf
- 22 <http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/49503>
- 23 Portwood-Stacer, L. (2010). ‘Constructing anarchist sexuality: Queer identity, culture, and politics in the anarchist movement.’ *Sexualities* 13(4):491.
- 24 <http://www.anarchist-studies.org/node/529>
- 25 *Laboratorium*. 2011. Vol. 3, no. 2:4–25
- 26 Sedgwick, E. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p22.

